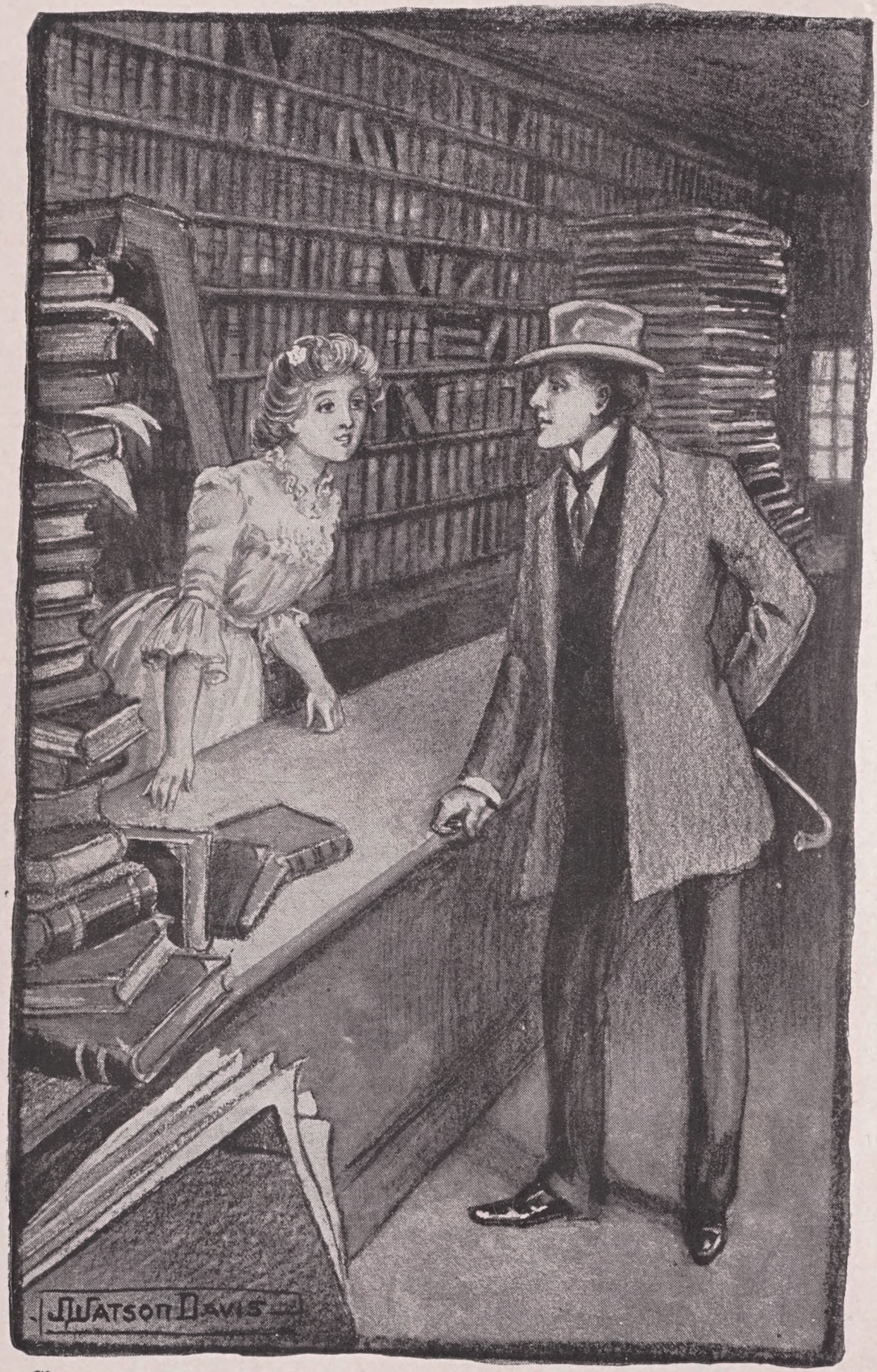

She was so pretty, that I stammered and couldn't remember what on earth it was I did want.—Page 35.

A Desperate Game.

A DESPERATE GAME

A NOVEL

By FLORENCE WARDEN

Florence A. V. James 389
928

"Give me a nook and a book,
And let the proud world spin round."

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A DESPERATE GAME.

By Florence Warden.

A DESPERATE GAME

CHAPTER I

WHIR-R-R-R-R! Whir-r-r-r-r!

At the door of the log-house, where he was sitting in his shirt and leather breeches, riding boots and sombrero hat, Gaspard Farebrother stopped, in his occupation of devouring coarse bread and fat pork, to listen.

Whir-r-r-r-r! Whir-r-r-r-r!

Fifteen months of life on a Californian ranch had taught the young Englishman to distinguish the gallop of horses, the whir-r of the long driving-whip, at a great distance.

He got up stiffly, for he had been riding hard that day, and was tired, and, strolling up a slight hill whence he could get a better view of the country, he shaded his eyes with his hand and looked over the plain.

He had not been mistaken. There, still in the distance, spurring the hardy little horse he rode as if his life depended upon his pace, was the lithe figure of his younger brother, Michael, coming towards him at the animal's full speed.

"What on earth's the matter with the fellow?"

muttered Gaspard, who knew that, after such a long day as Michael had just had, journeying to the nearest town for the necessary periodical food supplies, it was their custom to jog back at an easy pace.

When Michael had got near enough to see his brother, he took out of one of his pockets and waved aloft a tiny something which Gaspard guessed must be a letter. And the excitement was explained.

A letter from the old country was even more of a rarity to the young brothers than it is to most exiles. For the lads were orphans; and their nearest relative, their father's sister, though she had always expressed the greatest affection for the nephews, whose prospects depended upon her, was lazy and by no means a good correspondent.

Gaspard was as much excited as his brother by the time the two met.

"Well, who's it from, eh?" he asked, before the younger had got near enough to throw him the precious epistle.

But then he was surprised to see that it was more than excitement that burned in Michael's black eyes and in his bronzed cheeks.

"You'll see, you'll see," answered Michael, as, with fierce irritation in every look and tone and movement, he flung himself off his pony, and turned the animal loose. "We're paupers, Gaspard, you and I, paupers, my boy, as sure as we stand here!"

"What do you mean—paupers?"

"Read and judge for yourself," said Michael

shortly, as he thrust the sheet of paper into his brother's hand.

The letter began: "My dear Michael," and was in a feminine hand, which Gaspard did not know. So, instead of beginning by reading it, he turned at once to the signature at the end. This was "Ellen Chalmers."

"From Mrs. Chalmers, the Vicar's wife!" murmured he in surprise.

"Yes, yes, go on. Read it," said Michael, impatiently.

Gaspard obeyed, and read the following:—

My dear Michael,—Of course you will be very much surprised at getting a letter from me, as I have never written to you before, and I should not now but that I think you ought to know what is going on up at The Abbey.

Of course, the Vicar says I am an interfering old busy-body to take any notice of it at all. He says I am the regulation parson's wife, who will have a finger in every pie and upset the parish if she can. So you see what I have brought upon myself by writing; yet, nevertheless, I do write, because I feel that I ought.

During the last few months a certain individual who calls himself Doctor Skates has been staying down here at St. Mary's-on-Sea with his wife. He calls himself an American, but I really don't know what he is. Both he and his wife appear to be very pleasant people, and they have wormed their way into the liking of everybody. (The Vicar says "wormed their way" is not a right ex-

pression. He says the general liking for them is only the natural consequence of their being pleasanter people than the rest of us; but I'm not going to allow that.)

They appear to be pretty well off; they have taken a furnished house here, for which they are still paying the winter terms of two guineas a week. (The Vicar says I am a female Paul Pry because I know this. But I don't care.) Your aunt, Miss Farebrother, seems to be greatly taken both with the Doctor and his wife; and one or other or both of them have been going to see her regularly every day for some time. Of course, as the Vicar says, this may be all right; but what I don't like is that Miss Farebrother seems to have changed a little since these people became so intimate with her. The Doctor goes in for following some sort of new religion—a kind of Spiritualism, I think, and I can't help fancying that he is trying to make a convert of your aunt.

(The Vicar says that this is my nasty jealousy, because Miss Farebrother has never gone regularly to church. But it is not true. Though she does not often come to church, and never did, she has been just as generous as usual to our little charities, and the Church Warming Fund.)

Now, though I have been uneasy about this for some time, knowing how much you and your brother depend upon your aunt, I should not have ventured to write like this, but for something that happened yesterday. I was going down to leave some tea and a coal ticket for old Saunders, and I happened to pass up the Abbey lane.

And who should be going up the other side but Dr. Skates, with another man, who looked just like a lawyer. The Vicar says I can't tell a lawyer by the look of him, but I know better; and though I should not like to repeat the few words I caught of what Dr. Skates was saying to him, I feel sure that they implied that some sort of business was to be transacted with your aunt.

I went home much excited, when I had seen them go through the Abbey gate. The Vicar laughed at me, as usual, and at first forbade me to write to you at all. But when he had thought it over (he says it was to keep me quiet!), he told me that if I didn't mind making myself a laughing-stock I might send you a few lines, but not a ream. As I think I am getting near the ream now, I will not say any more, except to urge you both, or one of you, at any rate, to come back to England with the least possible delay.

I know Miss Farebrother is a thoroughly good woman; but if Dr. Skates should not be the disinterested gentleman we hope he is—well, well, perhaps I had better not say any more.

I do hope your stay in California has done Gaspard's health all the good the doctors hoped from it. From what your aunt has told me of your letters, I believe this has been the case. But if he cannot come back on account of his health, at least I should advise you to do so.

Tell Gaspard to forgive me for writing to you instead of to him. Although he is the elder, I have thought it best to write to you, as I know, from the wicked pranks you used to play at home,

that you have no end of energy, as well as robust health.

Believe me, with kindest regards from the Vicar and myself, to you both,

Yours very sincerely,

ELLEN CHALMERS.

P. S.—I have just this moment heard that Dr. Skates and his wife are going to stay at The Abbey!!! Now, do you think I am right to write to you?—E. C.

Gaspard read the letter through slowly, and with the greatest attention. Then he folded it carefully, and the brothers looked at each other.

A pair of bright-faced, handsome lads they were, even in the weather-stained, rough clothing that they wore on the ranch. Perhaps, indeed, the shabby, rusty-colored slouch hat he wore added something to the picturesqueness of Gaspard, a tall, slightly built man of four-and-twenty, whose ragged brown beard and curly hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin, made an ensemble that a painter would have found strikingly attractive.

Michael, the younger by a year and a half, was shorter and of sturdier build; his black hair was straight, and he had no beard. But in his black eyes there was a devilry, in his movements a restless energy, which would have made him, in many eyes, even more attractive than his handsomer-featured brother.

He also wore with some grace the ranch costume of leather breeches and loose shirt; in the

interests of truth it is unfortunately necessary to admit that the shirt was never the picturesque red garment of melodrama, but a baggy thing of vague and undecided tints, usually much deteriorated by the laundry methods of the ranch.

"Well, what do you think?" said Michael.

"I think things look very dicky," said Gaspard, rather dismally. "Ten to one the old lady's right, and this Skate is some impostor who has got hold of Aunt."

Michael nodded.

"We must get back as fast as we can," said he, with decision.

His elder brother looked surprised.

"How can we?" asked he, blankly. "We can't give up the ranch. We can't trust two raw hands like Haynes and Burrell to do the work by themselves. We can't——"

"We can, though, and we must," interrupted Michael, shortly. "Look here, Gaspard. Our father trusted Aunt to look after us, in consideration of all he did for her; he lived a bachelor for years to look after her; and when he married, he considered her more than his wife, more than anybody. Now, if after that, she doesn't treat us fairly, she deserves to be hanged, that's all."

"There's no way of forcing her to treat us fairly, though," said Gaspard, gloomily. "If she chooses not to leave us anything, and to give it all away to Skates, or to an asylum for cats, for that matter, nobody can prevent her. And you know what these old ladies are."

"I know that I'm not going to let it be a walk-

over for Skates, anyhow," said Michael, promptly. "To-morrow I just pack up my traps for England, Home, and——Skates!"

And he clenched his teeth and shook his fist on the last word.

The less energetic and more thoughtful Gaspard was not long in making up his mind to follow his brother's example. After a discussion with the other young fellows who were their partners in the ranch, an arrangement was come to by which, by a concession on their side, they left it open for themselves to return or to make over their share in the property to their partners, who were to look after their interests while they were away.

And within three weeks from the receipt of the letter from the Vicar's wife the two young men had sailed on their way from New York to Liverpool.

They had thought it best to send no word of their intention to return; and it was not until they arrived in London that they wrote to inform their aunt they were coming to see her, and that Michael wrote a little note to Mrs. Chalmers to thank her for her letter.

They had some shopping to do in town before they could make their appearance at St. Mary's-on-Sea. Gaspard's beard had to give place to the simplicity of a well-trimmed mustache, and his locks had to be shorn to a civilized length. Michael, however, annoyed and amazed his brother by leaving his lank black hair too long, and by shaving off his mustache altogether.

And he not only refused to give any explanation

of this freak of taste, but he insisted upon going to order his clothes by himself, instead of allowing Gaspard, whose taste was much better than his own, to help him in his choice.

And this was not the last of his eccentricities. When they were well on their way to St. Mary's, very snugly ensconced in the opposite corners of a first-class smoking compartment, Michael put down his paper, and, squaring his elbows on his knees, leant forward, and said:

"Look here, I want to tell you something. When we get near St. Mary's, you're just to go on, whatever happens. Don't mind me."

"What do you mean?" asked Gaspard. "I can't quite make you out lately. What is gained by making a mystery to me of the things you're going to do?"

But Michael was obstinate. His black eyes twinkled, and he answered coolly: "I mean to set about things my own way. If I were to tell you everything, you'd spend an hour arguing, and you'd very likely end by giving the show away. You see you're easily talked over; I'm not."

So Gaspard sat back, feeling rather sorry he had ever left California, and wearing a face so dismal that presently his brother burst out laughing.

"Don't look as if you were going to a funeral, man!" cried he, as he slapped the gloomy Gaspard sharply on the knee. "We'll rout the enemy never fear!"

Gaspard, however, continued to look serious.

"I'm beginning to think we've come over on a wild-goose chase," said he. "After all, what

business have we over *here* at all? Aunt can't be prevented by us from leaving her money to whom she likes, and it's not a very dignified thing for us to do to try to influence her. Besides, we don't even know that it may not be all a mistake. We've only that letter to go upon; and Mrs. Chalmers herself confesses that she's called a meddling old busybody!"

Michael's mouth looked square as he answered:

"Well, we're in for it now, you know. And it's all nonsense about Aunt's being at liberty to leave her money to whom she likes. You know she's bound in honor to leave it to us, and that she gave her word to our father that she would. If it hadn't been for him she would have lost every shilling of it. You know that story."

"But this Skates may be a perfectly honest man, and a good friend!"

"I mistrust the good friends of rich old ladies!" retorted Michael.

"And how about our reason for coming over? How shall we explain that? It looks very suspicious that you've had no answer to your letter telling Aunt we were coming down."

"She's not fond of letter-writing," said Michael.

"Supposing we should find we're not admitted!" suggested Gaspard.

"Then, by Jove, that will prove we were right to come!" retorted the younger brother.

Now, although this was perfectly true, yet it did not suggest a very lively prospect of affairs in

case Miss Farebrother should really have been "got hold of" by the fascinating strangers. They could not force their way into their aunt's house against her will, and, although they were not penniless, they would certainly be put in a very awkward position if they should be thus thrown upon their own resources, after abandoning their ranch to come back.

A certain uneasiness began to take possession even of the buoyant Michael, and after softly whistling to himself to show that he was perfectly light of heart—which he was not—he relapsed into silence.

When the train stopped at Cliffgate, which was the station before St. Mary's-on-Sea, Michael said he would get out and have a drink. Gaspard urged him not to do this, saying that, now he was so near his journey's end, he might well wait a few minutes. With his usual obstinacy, the younger brother persisted in his intention, and the end of it was that the train went on without him.

Gaspard was a good deal annoyed by this incident, until it came into his head to wonder whether this freak on his brother's part had been part of a set plan, to which he meant to refer when he said Gaspard was to go straight on, whatever happened.

Not all pleased with Michael's behavior, Gaspard was by no means in a good humor when the train drew into the little station at St. Mary's-on-Sea, and he threw his rugs and his brother's to a porter with a scowl on his handsome face.

He thought he would leave his luggage at the

station and walk on to the Abbey, as he did not care to face alone the risk of being turned away from his aunt's gates with a local flyman to witness his humiliation. As he walked along the platform to point out his portmanteau and his brother's to the porter, he noticed a man standing evidently waiting for some one, and was so much struck by his appearance that he turned back to look at him again.

The man's dress suggested that he might be a minister of religion, though it was not easy to say to what denomination he belonged. He was a fine looking man of some fifty to fifty-five years of age, tall, of stalwart build, and rather stout. His blue eyes were mild and kindly, and his whole face, which was fresh-colored and fair of complexion, beamed with kindliness and shrewd good-humor. Hair, which was growing gray, and was worn rather long, and a well-trimmed beard, rather whiter than the hair of his head, added to the venerable dignity of a most imposing and prepossessing figure.

Gaspard wondered who he was.

When he had given his things in the charge of the station authorities, the young man left the little building, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment on seeing his aunt's little pony-carriage, with her pair of pretty ponies, waiting outside.

The groom, who was standing at their heads, recognizing Gaspard, touched his hat, and told him the chaise had come to meet him and his brother.

A sense of comfort and satisfaction rushed into

the young man's heart, and at the same moment a lady, who was the sole occupant of the little carriage, smiled and bowed to him, inviting him to approach.

With a sudden inkling of the truth, Gaspard raised his hat and went up to her.

"I must introduce myself, Mr. Farebrother," said she, speaking in a soft and gentle voice which was full of charm. "You are Gaspard, I'm sure. Your aunt was not well enough to come to meet you, so she asked the Doctor and me to come instead. I don't suppose you know who I am; but we are great friends of Miss Farebrother's. Our name is Skates; Doctor and Mrs. Skates."

CHAPTER II

GASPARD replied in a suitable manner to these kindly words, returned the warm pressure of the lady's hand, and wished fervently that Michael were beside him.

He was bewildered; thrown off his balance. What had they been doing, pair of young fools that they were, to leave their ranch and their healthy and not unhappy life, just to find that they had been misled by an idle rumor into believing that their prospects were in danger.

Nothing, surely, could be less like the mien and manners of an adventuress than the gracious

way in which Mrs. Skates asked what had become of his brother, insisted on his getting into the carriage beside her, and despatched the groom into the station to tell the Doctor that Mr. Farebrother had come.

Gaspard took a fancy to the lady at once. She was apparently somewhere between forty-five and fifty years of age, but her face could still be called handsome, and the gentle, Madonna-like expression of her hazel eyes accorded harmoniously with her soft voice and gentle manners. She was dressed in a very handsome mantle of the regulation dolman kind, so dear to elderly ladies, wore a gray satin bonnet, almost Quaker-like in color and shape, under which her wavy brown hair, plentifully sprinkled with gray, hung in an old-fashioned way, forming a frame to the gentle face.

She seemed much disappointed that she had only one nephew to bring home to Miss Farebrother, instead of the two she had expected.

"And see how we have been preparing for you!" said she, pointing to a row of paper bags on the seat in front. "I have been all round the place shopping in order to get something nice to tempt your appetites after your journey. Miss Farebrother laughed at me, but I told her now I had no boys of my own it amused me to look after other people's."

"You're very good," said Gaspard, much comforted by this reception, which seemed to show that he would be well received by his aunt also.

At that moment Doctor Skates hurried out of the station, with both hands outstretched.

"Hallo, why, how's this, only one of you, eh? What's become of number two?"

The Doctor's warmth was so exuberant that, for the first time, Gaspard found shooting through his mind a suspicion that this welcome to himself was overdone. He was ashamed of himself the next moment. He was ashamed also to find, when he was being driven towards the Abbey by Mrs. Skates, while the Doctor insisted on going on foot, that he did not like the face of the lady beside him quite so well when it was in repose as he had done while he was under the momentary spell of her voice and of her smile.

He tried to dispel his uneasiness by asking Mrs. Skates questions about his aunt. And her charm became immediately as strong as ever.

"I wish I could say Miss Farebrother was as well as we should like to see her!" she answered, shaking her head rather gravely. "I'm afraid she's been worrying herself a little lately; she caught a nasty cold in the winter, and was a long time shaking it off, and then she had a touch of influenza, or something of that sort."

"Did she? She never said anything about it in her letters," said Gaspard.

"No. She's a dear, brave lady, who neve will own to being ill. I think she mopes a little, all by herself in that great house, with nobody but servants about her. Anyhow, she seems to have grown much more cheerful since she's not been quite alone."

"You and Dr. Skates are staying with her, I understand?" said Gaspard.

As he looked at the lady, but certainly with no intention of spying upon her looks or gestures, Gaspard had a fancy that he saw a slight quivering of the muscles of her face when he came to the last word.

"Yes," she answered, after perhaps a couple of seconds' pause. "How did you hear of it?"

Gaspard, still rather ashamed of his suspicions, yet was prudent enough not to betray too much.

"Oh, you know we've been in London some days," he answered, evading a direct answer.

"I confess I was rather reluctant to accept your aunt's invitation at first," said Mrs. Skates, with a gentle little sigh. "To tell you the truth, I do love my freedom; that's true American, isn't it? And no matter how hospitably you may be received, there is always a certain inevitable feeling of constraint on one when one is staying in the house of a friend, no matter how intimate. Don't you think so?"

"No doubt there is," assented Gaspard.

"So, on the whole, I'm glad, not only for your aunt's sake and yours, but for my own also, that you and your brother have come back, and that we can now, without unkindness, leave the Abbey."

Gaspard felt reassured and remorseful. Since she had made up her mind to leave the Abbey at once, it seemed pretty clear that she must be free from any sinister intentions.

"Perhaps she won't let you go," suggested Gaspard. "She might think my brother and me

a very bad exchange for you. She was not always best pleased with our pranks in the old days, when we were back from Eton, and then from Oxford."

Mrs. Skates laughed with amusement.

"I dare say she wasn't!" said she. "But you've grown older and staider now, I've no doubt. Anyhow, now you've come, we've got our excuse for going. She can't say she's lonely any longer!"

They were by this time in the Abbey Lane, in which unpretending thoroughfare Miss Farebrother's house was situated.

The Abbey was a building which always excited surprise and curiosity in both visitors and passers-by. Originally a most modest dwelling, erected on the site of some bygone and forgotten monastic pile of the Middle Ages, it had been added to and almost rebuilt by Miss Farebrother's predecessor, until it was now a huge, rambling erection of red brick, of a fanciful style of architecture, with an oriel window here, a turret there; an imposing baronial hall with a handsome timbered roof at one end of the building, and a nest of dingy little rooms at another.

The whole place wanted more space; it was too massive for its position, close behind a high wall in a narrow lane: one felt that it ought to have been in a wide park, with lawns on every side, instead of being so placed that no passer-by could even get a good look at its fanciful proportions.

Gaspard felt strangely moved when he found himself under the glass roof that led from the

outer gate in the wall to the Gothic porch, squeezed into an angle, under which was the front door of his aunt's house.

The manservant who opened the door was a stranger to him, but Gaspard noticed that he was very obsequious—there was no other word for it—to Mrs. Skates, who put her hand into the arm of the returning nephew, and asked where Miss Farebrother was.

"In the drawing-room, madam," replied the man. And he waited for them to follow him along the short passage on the left which led to the long, light room, leading into the garden, which Gaspard so well remembered.

The door was opened. There came the old, overpowering rush of warm, scented air, which the young man remembered so well as a characteristic sign of his aunt's whereabouts. The next moment he had instinctively disengaged himself from Mrs. Skates, and was crossing the long room rapidly towards the little old lady who was sitting by the fire, with her pet dog in her lap.

The little Pomeranian leaped down, and barked at the newcomer.

Miss Farebrother looked up without a smile.

Gaspard was chilled in an instant.

Some subtle change had come over the tiny, faded lady whom he and his brother had once looked upon as a second mother. Instead of the tender, anxious eyes which had looked at him when, on the eve of the momentous journey which had been ordered for his health, she had gloated solicitously over his then thin features, he now

met a cold stare of something which was not unlike suspicion.

Instead of the clinging hands which had instinctively sought to detain him on that occasion, it was a dry, cold touch of the fingers that Miss Farebrother now extended to her nephew, as he stooped to kiss her forehead.

"How do you do, Gaspard?" she said. "Shut the door, John, if nobody else is coming in."

"Doesn't the dear boy look well?" said Mrs. Skates, in the soft voice which Gaspard suddenly felt that he hated. "You have told me that he used to be pale and thin."

"Yes, he doesn't look as if he'd been pining away, certainly," said Miss Farebrother, who was already patting her black satin lap as a sign to her dog to get back into his old place. "I thought your brother was coming, too?"

She was looking at the fire.

"He got left behind at Cliffgate, Aunt. I expect he'll be here by the next train."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I dare say he can take care of himself," said Miss Farebrother, indifferently. "Where's the Doctor, Blanche?"

"Oh, he walked."

"Dear me! It's a new thing for the young men to drive while their elders walk, isn't it? However, I suppose it's all right. A sign of the times, that's all."

Mrs. Skates laughed sweetly.

"Oh, it wasn't your dear nephew's fault. You know the Doctor's rough, obstinate ways. He marched off by himself with a cheery wave of the

hand before we could so much as open our mouths, didn't he, Gaspard?"

And she turned to the young man with a sort of look of sweet apology for using his Christian name.

"Oh, yes," said the young man, who felt that he was choking. "I should have been very glad to walk, too. In fact, I think the sooner I walk out of the house the better," he added, with a sudden sullen note of indignation.

Mrs. Skates' soft hands were upon his arm in a moment.

"My dear boy, don't," she said softly. "Believe me, we are all, all, delighted to have you back."

"It doesn't look like it," said he, still smarting.

But Miss Farebrother took no notice of the little discussion. She still sat, the same little wax figure with the fluffy, fair hair which the boys had always suspected to be an artificial product, playing with her dog's tail with tiny yellow hands flashing with jeweled rings, and gazing at the fire.

"Come and have some tea," cooed Mrs. Skates, as she led the angry young man out of the room, and pushed him playfully into the breakfast-room, where she made him sit in a big armchair by the fire, while she rang the bell.

"Don't take any notice of her funny little ways, my dear boy," she said gently. "She'll be all right presently. She has these fits sometimes; she'll soon be herself again, and treat you with all the kindness you could ask. Come now, have some tea."

Then there was a footstep and a cheery voice in the hall, and Dr. Skates, looking more reverend and amiable than ever without his hat, came in and sat down for a chat about the voyage home, and the adventures of the brothers.

In spite of his doubts of these two people, poor Gaspard felt himself for the moment comforted by their geniality; and when the footman came in to ask the Doctor to go to Miss Farebrother, the young man missed his cheery presence.

"Do you find your aunt much changed?" asked Mrs. Skates anxiously, as soon as her husband had left the room.

"Altogether changed," replied Gaspard emphatically. "I never saw such a transformation in anybody. She used to be the warmest-hearted woman in the world. Now—I can't understand it."

He started up, and began pacing up and down the room. Mrs. Skates looked rather alarmed; and presently she told him she would go into the drawing-room and speak to Miss Farebrother, and try to make her more reasonable.

"I'm sure she doesn't really mean to be unkind. It's only her way," were her parting words.

She did not leave him long by himself. Gaspard was just looking at his watch, and wondering whether he should go out to engage a bed at an hotel rather than submit to any more snubs from his aunt, when Mrs. Skates re-entered the room, pounced upon him with a smiling face, and carried him back into the drawing-room.

"I don't know what you're sulking about," said his aunt, pettishly, the moment he came near her. "You are very welcome to stay here as long as you please, of course, you and Michael. I'm only afraid you'll find it rather dull. You were not much given to take life and higher things seriously, if I remember rightly."

"However I look upon life, Aunt," said Gaspard, with some spirit, "I don't intend to trespass upon your kindness if I'm not wanted here. Neither does Michael. We came expecting to find you as you were when we went away; now you're changed, and, I daresay, we are not so much to your taste as we used to be."

"Oh, it's of no use talking to him," said Miss Farebrother, with a little irresponsible wave of the hand. "Dear Doctor Skates, I should like you to read that chapter about the 'Spirit World Around us' once more, if you please."

Mrs. Skates did her best to entertain the young man until dinner-time. When they all met in the dining-room, Miss Farebrother did condescend to put up her long-handled eyeglasses, and to look for the first time approvingly at her nephew.

"You look well in evening dress," she said shortly, as they sat down to dinner. "You haven't lost your good looks, Gaspard. He's a handsome fellow, isn't he, Blanche?"

"Very, very handsome indeed," said Mrs. Skates, with a gentle laugh. "I was saying so to dear Jamie just now."

But the Doctor, who perhaps thought this topic frivolous, soon engrossed all Miss Farebrother's

conversation, so that again, and so long as dinner lasted, Gaspard was left to Mrs. Skates for entertainment. And he was so much disgusted with the whole business that he wished his aunt good-night, immediately dinner was over, and retired to his room on the plea of a cold in the head.

He did not stay there, however, but went wandering about the house, recalling the merry games he and his brother had had there in their boyhood. Though the soft cooing tones of Mrs. Skates, hoping he would be better in the morning, still rang in his ear, though his hand still tingled with the warm grip the Doctor had given him, he felt lonely, miserable, and chilled by his aunt's coldness.

He had wandered down into the passage outside the drawing-room door, when he suddenly caught the sound of Dr. Skates' voice, speaking very angrily to his wife just inside the breakfast-room.

Gaspard was drawing back, afraid of overhearing what they were saying, when suddenly the Doctor came out of the room, followed by Mrs. Skates. The Doctor and his wife both started a little at the meeting, and the former frowned. Mrs. Skates tried to smile, but the attempt was a failure.

"Your brother has come, Mr. Farebrother," said she. "He is in the drawing-room."

Gaspard started forward in delight and surprise and some bewilderment.

What on earth had Michael been up to, for the manner of both the doctor and his wife to

have become in such a short space of time so frigid? He flung open the drawing-room door, and rubbed his eyes at the spectacle that met them.

CHAPTER III

Who was the solemn and priggish young man who, clad in the somber black of the deacon of a dissenting chapel, with his hair parted in the middle and brushed down, lank and smooth, on each side, was sitting, with folded hands and crossed knees, besides Miss Farebrother, and speaking to her in precise and didactic tones?

Surely this could not be Michael, merry, devil-may-care, impudent Michael, of the rattling tongue and the roguish eye?

Even the voice was changed; the bubbling fun which seemed always ready to turn a speech into a laugh had disappeared from the flat tones in which he was now laying down the law; and as for the twinkling black eyes which were such a feature of his face, the person who now sat gravely conversing on the subject of the weather wore a huge pair of tinted spectacles, which alone would have sufficed to transform him beyond recognition.

As Gaspard burst into the room, the young rascal held up his hand solemnly:—

"I beg," said he, "that you will shut the door.

I have an aversion to draughts, which I believe that my aunt shares ?"

And with all the impudence in the world, he turned his head stiffly towards Miss Farebrother.

The old lady seemed to be rather taken aback by the unexpectedness of her younger nephew's change of demeanor from the lively lad she remembered. It was without any of her petulant air of injured dignity, and even with some touch of nervousness, that she said quickly, in answer to his question :—

"Oh, yes, I do, I do dislike draughts very much."

"I have a distinct remembrance that you did share my own dislike to them," said Michael, while his brother stared at him, with a dropping jaw.

It was Miss Farebrother's turn to stare. She turned to look full in the face of her younger nephew, and said shortly :—

"I don't remember that you shared any of my tastes or dislikes before. You've changed a great deal since you went away, Michael."

Michael uttered a little laugh that was discreet and mirthless and subdued to his new character :—

"Fortunately, dear Aunt," said he, "we all change as time goes on, and I am not alone in that respect. If I have toned down my former exuberance of spirits to a demeanor more in keeping with my present views of the seriousness of life and its responsibilities, I trust that you will not accord me the less approval on that account."

Miss Farebrother looked at him again, in a dazed way. It was evident that she would have liked to be cold and uncivil to him, as she had been to his elder brother; but the artful young man had taken her so completely by surprise, had held his assumed character of didactic and self-assertive prig so well, that she did not quite know how to meet him.

"Well, I don't know," she muttered at last. "I must say I think I preferred you as you were when you went away. These sudden and unprepared for changes are disconcerting. At any rate," she went on, raising her voice and turning with increased irritation upon poor Gaspard, "your brother should have warned me of the alteration in you. Why didn't you warn me, Gaspard?"

That young man stammered, grew red, did not know what to answer. But the imperturbable Michael placidly helped him through his difficulty.

"No doubt," said he, "Gaspard has not noted the change in me, if there is any change. What to you, aunt, appears disconcertingly sudden, may have been too gradual in his eyes to be noted at all."

"But those horrible glasses—when did you take to wearing those?" asked Miss Farebrother sharply.

"Oh, recently, quite recently," replied Michael, with superb calm; though Gaspard, who knew how very recent this freak was, could scarcely restrain a sudden impulse to burst out laughing.

Miss Farebrother, who had regained some of the self-command of which her surprise had deprived her, went on with increasing asperity :

"At any rate, you have gained amazingly in assurance. You almost ordered my friends, Dr. Skates and his wife, out of the room."

"Pardon me, aunt, I think not, I trust not," said the young rascal blandly. "I merely suggested that I should like a few minutes' conversation with you, whom I have always looked upon as the nearest and dearest friend of my brother and myself, apart from these somewhat too assiduous new friends of yours. I had no intention of driving them away. Indeed, if I may use the expression, they may be said to have "bounced off" before I had well uttered my most gently-urged plea for a minute's privacy with you."

His tone and stiff manner, as he uttered this long speech, and appeared to grow more priggish every moment, were so intensely though undesignedly funny, that Gaspard had to walk away towards the farthest window, and Miss Farebrother herself began to laugh at him.

"Well, your impudence is amusing, at least," said she. "Only, once for all you must understand that I cannot allow you to be discourteous to my other guests. Dr. and Mrs. Skates have become very dear friends of mine—"

"As, indeed, I trust they may soon be of mine also," broke in the barefaced hypocrite politely. "Gaspard, what is the matter with you ? " he suddenly said, turning abruptly to face his brother,

who was manifesting symptoms of approaching apoplexy.

"Oh, they will not suit Gaspard," said Miss Farebrother, who was disturbed out of her quiet routine of life, puzzled by the anomalies presented by the different demeanor of her two nephews and not, perhaps, without qualms of conscience as to her recent intentions towards the children of her dead brother, to whose affection and care she did indeed, as the lads knew, owe all her own prosperity. "He was rude and unfriendly to them the moment he came in, and he was so unresponsive to the kindness of Mrs. Skates, who was doing her best to amuse him all dinner time, that when he had left us in what appeared to be a fit of the sulks, the poor lady actually burst into tears, and said she could not remain under the same roof with any one who treated her so cruelly."

Gaspard hurried across the room on learning this surprising news.

"I assure you, aunt," he began.

But he was interrupted by Michael, who, raising a warning forefinger in an emphatic manner, wagged his head slowly from side to side, and said solemnly :

"Refrain, refrain, Gaspard, from any such display of unnecessary violence as is, I fear, in your mind. I am aware that these ebullitions of temper on your part are by no means infrequent, but——"

But his brother could stand no more.

"Oh, shut up!" said he angrily, as he turned abruptly away.

Miss Farebrother could not help laughing. Michael turned unblushingly towards her.

"I trust you will overlook this display of undisciplined feeling," he said, as Gaspard fumed and stamped about the room, divided between a slight inclination to roar with laughter, and a stronger wish to punch his brother's head. "He is, indeed, far from well, and to that cause alone you must attribute any apparent discourtesy on his part towards your charming friend."

"He doesn't look ill though," said Miss Farebrother. "Indeed, I never saw him look half so well in his life."

"The fact that he excused himself from your society and that of your friends, as you have told me, is sufficient proof that he is suffering," persisted Michael, as he rose from his seat.

"Where are you going?" said Miss Farebrother, quickly.

"Shall I now beg your friends to return, and apologize for what you appear to think they may have interpreted as an act of discourtesy on my part?" said Michael.

Miss Farebrother looked from him to his brother and back again, and frowned a little.

"You may if you like," said she rather shortly. "And I think, if you will take my advice, you will both go off to bed now, and leave me to make it right with Dr. Skates and his wife. For to tell you the truth, Michael, I scarcely think your pedantic way of talk will be more to their taste than your brother's sulkiness. You're a very odd pair of young men."

Michael stopped to argue the point.

"While I am deeply grieved," he began.

Then Gaspard removed him bodily from the hearthrug and held out his hand to his aunt.

"Good night, aunt; I suppose you won't let me kiss you," he said gruffly.

While Miss Farebrother, with a sudden touch of feeling, was about to raise her little wrinkled yellow face, Michael cut in between the two and kissed her first on one cheek and then on the other, boldly winking at his brother over her head as he did so.

Gaspard was so much taken aback by this piece of effrontery on his brother's part that he drew back hastily, and contented himself with a bow to Miss Farebrother as he shook hands with her.

"Good night, my dear aunt," said Michael, as he retreated towards the door, "I thank you, we thank you very sincerely for your most kind welcome."

Then he whisked his brother out of the room, and with a violent nudge of his elbow, drew his attention to the fact that the door of the breakfast-room was open, and that Dr. and Mrs. Skates were sitting inside.

Michael put his head into the room and said in his assumed solemn voice:

"I wish you a very good-night, dear Mrs. Skates, and you, Doctor, I am obliged to you for your great kindness in allowing me an interview of a few precious moments with my dear aunt. She is now most anxious to see you both again, and I trust you will forgive me for having kept

her from your charming society to converse with her for a few moments about our private affairs."

The doctor said nothing in answer to this tirade, but Mrs. Skates tried to smile graciously at him as she wished him good night.

Michael withdrew, stalked solemnly up the stairs with his brother, and marched into Gaspard's room with him without speaking.

The door once closed, however, he threw himself face downwards upon the bed and kicking out violently into the air, did his best to stifle the fierce explosion of laughter which convulsed him.

Gaspard, however, was very angry, and he seized his brother by the coat-collar, and flung him into a little tubby armchair that stood near the fireplace, where a small fire had been lighted which burned rather dismally in the long unused grate.

"What on earth do you mean by all this tomfoolery?" he asked impatiently. "Isn't it bad enough to be received as if we were a pair of thieves, without making things worse for us both by behaving like a confounded lunatic?"

"My good fellow, it's you who are the confounded lunatic, and I who am the incarnation of wisdom and good sense," retorted Michael, recovering himself a little, and wiping his eyes. "However, we won't discuss that. I've got something more important to talk about. Gaspard, I'm in love!"

His brother stopped short, and stared at him with all his eyes. He really began to think that something had occurred to upset the mental balance of the erratic Michael. After a few mo-

ments' consideration, however, he apparently decided that the young man's follies had better be allowed to burn themselves out unheeded, and he resumed his walk up and down the room with a slight shrug of the shoulders, and a gesture of disdain.

Michael would not be put off like this. He sprang at his brother, and cried, "Do you hear, I'm in love! In love! In love!"

"Oh, I don't care what you're in," said Gaspard pettishly.

"Yes, you do. I'll make you. Look here, old chap, I'm serious. Sit down and behave like a Christian, and I'll tell you all about it."

"I don't want to hear," growled Gaspard. But his brother, with his usual energy, got his own way, wheeled him into the corner by the fireplace, ruffled up his own hair to get rid of the Puritanical appearance that annoyed his brother, and proceeded with an amazing tale.

"When I got out of the train at Cliffgate," he said, "I went into one of the hotels that I knew, and changed my clothes."

"I never noticed that you had taken your bag with you!" cried Gaspard.

"No. Because I managed that you shouldn't see it as I got out; I put it under my rug," said Michael. "Well, I changed my clothes, and found I had a couple of hours to wait for the next train. So I wandered up the back streets of the town—you know how dead-and-alive they are now, out of the season—and presently I came upon a little dusty shop, quite on the out-

skirts, where they had a few curiosities and a lot of second-hand books in the window. I saw an ancient copy of Daudet's "Le Nabab," and thinking I should like to read it again, I went in, and found nobody in the shop. Of course I didn't care much whether I had the book or not, but you know how anxious one always is to get a thing when there is any obstacle put in the way. And I was not in the best of tempers to start with, so I thumped on the counter, and banged the only chair on the floor, and made such a devil of a row that presently I heard some one scattering down the stairs at a great rate. And there ran into the shop not a woman, Gaspard—oh, no! But the prettiest little fluffy-headed piece of Dresden china you ever saw. She looked awfully frightened—thought it was an army of Hooligans at least—and she asked what I wanted in the prettiest frightened way.

"She was so pretty, and looked so unlike what I had expected to find in the tumble-down old shop, that I stammered and couldn't remember what on earth it was I did want. Then she took a step back in an offended manner, as if to go away again, and I suddenly cried out that I wanted a book in the window, and took out some money.

"Then she turned very red, and asked if I would wait while she called the person the shop belonged to, and I was ready to sink into the earth. Of course I might have known this fairy didn't keep a second-hand bookshop. So I stammered, apologized, made an awful fool of my-

self, and I while was at it, in walked a tall, middle-aged woman with long ringlets and a little red nose, and thanked the Dresden china girl for coming down.

"Dresden china smiled, blushed again, said she didn't mind, and ran up-stairs.

"And the middle-aged woman told me the girl had lived in the rooms above for three or four years with her father, an old half-pay army man, Captain or Major something—till he died, and that she had been living on there ever since, because she'd nowhere else to go except to the house of some relations, whom she didn't much like, and who didn't seem very anxious to have her."

When he came to this point in his narrative, Michael sat up on the bed and threw up his eyes.

"Not anxious to have her!" he repeated, emphatically. "Not anxious to have her. Good Heavens! What must the creatures be like that didn't want to have a divinity like that among them! But, then, the keeper of the shop suggested that these people had sons, and that my beauty was too good-looking. Now there may be something in that, of course," went on Michael, judicially. "But, it's the sort of fault that might well be forgiven, I think, considering how uncommon it is!"

Gaspard was staring at him feebly, with a frown of amazement on his face.

"And you mean to tell me," he said, solemnly, when his brother paused for breath, "that at a time like this, when our very means of subsistence

are threatened, you can fool about and twaddle on about a girl whom you've seen once in a second-hand bookshop!"

And his tone grew loftier, and his chin rose gradually higher as he spoke.

"My dear fellow, there is between this particular girl in a second-hand bookshop (where she only happened to be by chance) and all other girls in all other second-hand bookshops the difference there is between chalk and cheese—and a vast deal more! I tell you she's peerless, divine, and the thought that she's hesitating between giving music lessons and going on the stage makes me sick!"

"Well, so it does me," said his brother drily, "so suppose we change the subject."

Michael sighed, rose slowly from the bed, and putting himself as close to the fender as he could without being singed, drew up his knees, hugged them tenderly, and rested his chin on the top.

"What's the use of changing it," he asked, meditatively, "when we can't find another half as nice?"

"Oh, stuff!" said Gaspard, angrily. "Look here, Michael, you've made a fool of yourself, and you're making a fool of me. You can't keep up this confounded masquerade of yours, and presently the disguise will fall off with a rush, you'll give yourself away for a humbug, and we shall both be discredited together."

Instead of making any polite rejoinder to this, Michael stuck out his chin and began to whistle.

Gaspard stamped with rage.

"Why can't you answer me, idiot?" he cried impatiently.

"My dear brother, I'm not an idiot, and I have nothing to answer," said Michael superbly. "Your own common sense ought to tell you that we have a careful game to play here. If these people, these Skateses, are all right—which they're not,"—added he in a sepulchral parenthesis, "then my masquerade, as you call it, will be just a joke and nothing more. But if they're not all right, as I strongly believe, then my masquerading will give us a chance against their masquerading. As it is, you must admit that she received me in my character of unmitigated prig better than she did you in your character of ordinary young man. So there you are, don't you know!"

But Gaspard would not be convinced.

"It's a disgusting business," he said gloomily, "and I've a good mind to take myself off without waiting for further developments."

"All right. Go if you like. I don't budge until I've cleared out the doctor!"

Gaspard planted himself by the mantelpiece, where he could get a look at his brother's face.

"After all, what right have we to suspect these people?" said he. "The woman seems a nice woman, and we have no right to make up our minds that there's anything wrong with either of them. Aunt has a right to choose her own friends, and if she likes to have them stay with her, why shouldn't she? This big house must be precious lonely when there's nobody in it but the servants and herself!"

"Well, my sweet youth, have it your own way. We'll say the dear doctor and his charming wife have no intentions but the best; we'll say that I'm a humbug, and that you're a discontented, cross-grained young jackanapes. But I persist in my opinion that things look very fishy for us, and that if we don't keep our eyes open we shall find ourselves left in the lurch, and ousted from all share either in Aunt's affection or Aunt's money. And you know as well as I do that, whether we have a right to the affection or not, we have indubitably a right to the money."

Gaspard said nothing, but he shrugged his shoulders with an uneasy frown. It was quite true that they had a right to expect that Miss Farebrother would keep her promise, made to their father, that they should inherit the money which he had saved for her. But he felt humiliated, irritated at the position in which they were thrown, and he was burning to find an excuse for getting away from "The Abbey," even at the risk of the loss of all his prospects.

So he said nothing, and there was a short silence.

At the end of a few seconds, however, Michael, who was still squatting before the fire, raised his head and looked intently at the clock over the mantelpiece. Gaspard opened his mouth to speak, but was stopped by a rapid gesture from his brother. Then, still without uttering a word, Michael began to draw himself, with a quiet, shuffling movement, rapidly in the direction of the door. Having reached it, he put his finger on his lip, and listened. Then, springing up

suddenly, he threw open the door, and was out of the room in an instant.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Gaspard heard him call out sharply.

There was no answer. Only a sound of shuffling and scuffling, stumbling, struggling.

"Gaspard! A light, quick!"

But before Gaspard had had time to light a candle at the gas and to take it into the corridor outside, he heard an abrupt exclamation in his brother's voice, and then next moment there was a fall. He reached the door in time to see Michael getting up from the floor with a red and angry face.

"What was it?" asked Gaspard breathlessly.

"Don't know," growled Michael, "but it was an eavesdropper, aud one with a very powerful fist."

And, ruefully rubbing his arms and his legs, Michael followed his brother back into the bedroom.

"Now, are you satisfied that there are enemies in the camp?" he asked sullenly, as he stood with his back against the door.

But Gaspard persisted that absolute proof was still wanting on which to accuse the doctor and his wife. Several of the servants were new, and it might have been one of these whom Michael had caught listening at the door.

But say what he would, the elder brother felt no more comfortable than the younger; and when they separated for the night, and Michael retired to his room, which was on the opposite side of the

corridor, both brothers were in the lowest of spirits, and one at least was inclined, to use his own expression, to "throw up the sponge."

CHAPTER IV

With the morning light, as usual, came brighter prospects, and pleasanter thoughts. The two young men, when they came down to breakfast, found only Dr. and Mrs. Skates in the breakfast-room, as Miss Farebrother had of late taken the first meal of the day in her own apartment.

Both the doctor and his wife, however, were so genial, so amusing and agreeable, that the brothers found their doubts of the pair growing weaker, and recognized how natural it was that their aunt should have been anxious to have these bright people in the same house with her.

Mrs. Skates wanted to know what they would like to do with themselves. Would they come out for a drive with her? Or would they go out to the golf-links with the doctor? Or——

Before she had finished her speech, she was interrupted by the entrance of Miss Farebrother's maid, a tall, thin, sly-looking person whom the brothers had never seen before. She brought a message from Miss Farebrother to Michael, asking if he would go up-stairs and see his aunt in her boudoir before she went out.

Gaspard noticed, though he disliked himself for not being able to help an instinct of the spy,

that both the doctor and Mrs. Skates looked for a moment disturbed and displeased by this message.

Michael, who had throughout the meal preserved his assumed air of profound priggishness, told the maid that he would not fail to fulfil his aunt's request; then he threw a swift glance at his brother and cast down his eyes as before.

Gaspard seized his arm as soon as he left the room, and hurried him out by a side-door into the garden.

"I say," he said, in good-humored remonstrance, "I do wish you'd drop that sanctimonious tone of yours! There's really no point in it, you know, since there's no trace of it about Skates or his wife."

"You wait a bit," retorted Michael. "Trust me, Gaspard; I'm a lot cleverer than you think!"

And, breaking away from his brother, he went back into the house, and stalked solemnly up the stairs to his aunt's little pink and cream-colored sitting-room, where Miss Farebrother, looking, in her white woolen dressing-gown trimmed with soft white fur, like a withered little fluffy chicken, put out a little yellow claw to greet him.

"I want to have a talk with you, Michael. You puzzle me," said she.

Michael prudently bowed in submission to her pleasure, but made no remark. She went on:—

"Sit down—no, not there. Sit in the light, where I can see you." Michael moved sedately to a chair, and sat down opposite a window. "Now I want to understand you. Is this serious

and solemn way you have got genuine or not?" Michael coughed gently, wondering whether he should confess. He would have liked to do so, would have liked to have a hearty laugh with his aunt, as he remembered her in the old days, to kiss and be friends. But it would not do to be rash; so he hesitated; and her next words proved that his hesitation was well founded. "Now, Dr. Skates," she went on, "I tell you frankly, says your prim ways are put on."

Then Michael spoke very stiffly.

"I'm afraid Dr. Skates does not shine in the virtue of the charity that thinketh no evil!"

His aunt drew herself up.

"On the contrary, he is a most noble and good man, one of the best I have ever met. I have the greatest confidence in him, the very greatest; and one of the reasons why I wished to see you this morning was to speak to you about him and his wife, and to ask you to disabuse your brother's mind of any prejudice he may have against either of them!"

She looked very earnestly, as she said these words, at her nephew, who kept a grave face, but felt much amused at the way in which his aunt had reversed the real positions of himself and his brother in this matter.

In the midst of his secret amusement, however, there flashed into the young man's mind a certain vivid suspicion that his aunt was speaking apologetically, nay guiltily. He noticed that she reddened a little as he turned his eyes full upon her through his glasses.

"I sincerely trust," said he, "that you will disabuse your mind of the idea that we are unduly prejudiced against your friends. But he has scarcely chosen the way to ingratiate himself with us, in objecting to my taking serious views of life especially as I understand he takes serious views of life himself."

"But he doesn't obtrude them upon people by a lugubrious tone and ponderous manner, as you do," went on his aunt, growing quite excited in her earnestness. "On the contrary, he is, as you must have seen, a delightful and genial companion. His views about the spirit world around us"—Michael pricked up his ears—"he keeps to himself. He never alludes to them but in the society of those who sympathize with his beliefs."

"And what particular beliefs does he then favor, Aunt?" asked Michael, assuming an air of profound, not to say ponderous attention, as he clasped his hands over one knee, and frowned portentously.

Miss Farebrother hesitated.

"Oh—er—well, he—he did not wish me to say anything about them to you. He is very modest, the dear Doctor."

"His modesty, Aunt, does him honor," rejoined Michael solemnly. "Still I should much like to hear his views, since I gather that they have, in some measure, become yours, and I have a notion they will be found to coincide with my own."

"Indeed?" said Miss Farebrother, in a lower tone. She looked at him for a few moments

silently, and then added, in a lower voice, almost timidly: "But not, I think, with Gaspard's?"

Michael waved his hand.

"There are," said he gravely, "differences between Gaspard and myself.—Whether he and I have exactly the same conception of the functions of the spirit-world—whether, in short, we hold the same views upon what the world calls spiritualism"—he saw by the slight start his aunt gave that he had made a shrewd guess—"is of small consequence, since we remain good friends in spite of the divergence of our opinions. But I should greatly like to hear more about this good doctor's views, or perhaps I may even say—powers?"

Miss Farebrother grew strangely agitated, interested, excited. It was easy for her nephew to see how strong the doctor had made his hold upon the old lady by the means now suggested.

"You may well say powers," she whispered. "Michael, I have seen and heard such things, under the doctor's guidance, that I could not tell you of. You would not believe me!"

"From an irresponsible person I might not indeed believe them," said her nephew blandly, "but from you I should know them to be true. So he holds intercourse with the spirits for your benefit?"

"And for the benefit of all who are in distress or difficulty," went on Miss Farebrother, quickly. "These spirits materialize and tell us of such cases, such dreadful cases of distress, as would never come to our poor mortal ears without their help."

"And so," said Michael, bending forward with respectful attention, "you are able to assist these sad cases, with the help of the good doctor?"

"Yes, yes, that's it, Michael. The dear creature will go miles to carry help to a poor or sick person, will take them money—"

"Your money?" suggested Michael as a matter of course.

"Yes. Unluckily the dear creatures are not rich. But they are not poor either. For every two sovereigns I give they give one. You see, Michael, I cannot be as freehanded as he would like me to be, because I look upon my money as held in trust for you boys, according to my promise to your father, to whom I owe all the happiness and comfort I have had in life."

Michael inclined his head, unable to speak. For he was deeply touched by this sudden revelation of his aunt's heart, while at the same time he felt within him a blind rage against the two persons who, he was now sure, had been using the most questionable means to obtain an undue influence over the poor lady. For one moment he again hesitated, as to whether he should blurt out his real opinions, but prudence warned him that to do so would be to forfeit the place he seemed to be getting in her favor by the course he was pursuing.

"And see," she went on, "the good man has had a vast experience of life——"

"I believe you!" thought Michael to himself.

"And he will be a good friend to you lads, who have had none."

"One learns experience abroad, Aunt," put in her nephew.

"Not such wide knowledge as his," said Miss Farebrother earnestly, "I repeat, he will be a better, wiser protector and guardian to you than I can be, and you will be glad, when you know him better, that—that—"

Perhaps there was a look in Michael's eye which made her pause. At any rate she did not finish her sentence, but sat back in her chair, trembling a little, and nothing more was said until her nephew asked, as if casually:

"Does Mr. Buckle know the Skateses, Aunt?"

Miss Farebrother started, and began to fidget in her chair.

Now Mr. Buckle was the senior partner of the firm of lawyers who had had Miss Farebrother's business in their hands for any number of years.

"Well, er—er—I don't know—I don't remember—What makes you ask such a question?" she said, suddenly breaking out into irritability.

Michael knew all he wanted to know, so he at once turned the subject.

"Oh, never mind," said he carelessly. "We will converse upon a subject more interesting. These manifestations." Miss Farebrother looked round her and seemed to shiver a little. "I trust I shall be favored by being permitted to be present at one of them."

"Well, I—I don't know. He didn't want me to mention the matter to you," murmured Miss Farebrother nervously. "He had fixed a seance for to-night, but we had given up the idea on

learning you were coming. You see some people—" she stopped.

"Some people have no sympathy with these deeply interesting subjects, and until you had learnt our views you could not be sure of ours," said Michael, taking up the sentence quite naturally.

"And I'm sure Gaspard would never—" she began quickly.

"Probably he might be unsympathetic. Then we would not request his presence at the manifestation. But as for me, dear aunt, I must beg you will insist on the good doctor's giving the proposed seance to-night, as intended, and in allowing me to participate in the undoubted interest and benefit to be derived from communing with the denizens of the unseen world."

Shaking with nervous excitement, the old lady said in a low voice: "And when you have heard —what you will hear, dear boy, will you be as ready to help as I am, as ready to forward the cause of noble charity in the world. Then I shall feel easier, when you consent to my giving."

Michael could scarcely bear this. For the old lady began to tap his sleeve gently, happy in the belief that she had a partner and helper now in what she believed was a noble work of mercy and universal kindness.

There was a moment's silence, and before they spoke again, there came a gentle knock at the door, and Mrs. Skates' cooing, caressing voice asked:

"May I come in, dearest?"

Miss Farebrother started, and Michael drew himself back in his chair. Mrs. Skates glided smiling into the room, and gave the old lady the morning's greetings. She noticed the agitation from which she was suffering, and said :

" I'm afraid your nephew has been letting you talk too much, dear. You seem nervous this morning."

Miss Farebrother said quickly, " Oh, my dear, no ! If I'm excited, it is with pleasure. Michael is as much interested in our interests as we are, Blanche, and he insists that we shall hold our seance to-night, and that he shall be present. You've got to tell the dear doctor."

Michael did not at first see the face of the good doctor's wife, as she had her back to him. But when presently she turned in his direction, her complexion was still a light green.

And he knew he had scored one peg in the game.

CHAPTER V

If Mrs. Skates was discomposed, however by Miss Farebrother's desire that the spiritualistic seance should be given that evening with Michael among the audience, she had tact enough not to allow any trace of her uneasiness to appear in her manner. Only that curious and unpreventible change in the tints of her complexion betrayed that anything was wrong with her.

"Very well, dearest," she said, "I'm so glad your dear nephews are interested in these matters, too, so very glad. I must go and tell the dear doctor. But first I must look after you."

And she began fussing about the old lady, drawing more closely round her shoulders the little shawl of soft, white wool which she wore, putting her footstool nearer, and then pulling down one of the blinds a little way, to soften the glare of the bright early spring sunshine.

"Oh, never mind me, Blanche. I'm all right, thank you."

But Mrs. Skates planted herself in front of the little old lady, put her head on one side, and shook it gently.

"I don't think you are," said she sweetly. "You know it's not good for you to excite yourself with too much talking. I really," she went on playfully, "shall have to send your dear nephew away. And then I must ring for Anson, and tell her to bring you——"

Miss Farebrother interrupted with an impatient frown.

"I don't like that Anson," she said petulantly. "I never have liked her from the first moment you brought her from town. She's very plain, for one thing, and I dislike plain people. And then her eyes are too close together, and I believe she ferrets in my drawers. I don't like her at all."

Mrs. Skates kept up her rather stereotyped smile while this accusation was brought against the maid of her choosing; but she said:

"Well, dearest, if you don't like her, you can easily give her a month's notice, you know!"

"But I don't want to have her about me for another month," protested the old lady. "I should like her to go away at once. I am sorry now you persuaded me to send away old Perkins."

Mrs. Skates darted a rapid glance at Michael: but he was sitting bolt upright in front of a little side-table, apparently absorbed in the exciting joys of an album of alpine scenery. The ladies might have been discussing a pattern in crochet or the price of poultry for all the interest he showed.

But he did hear. And he did note these words, and he understood now how it was that dear old Perkins, the kindest-hearted creature and most devoted servant in the world, had given place to the sinister-looking Anson, to whom he had already taken a strong dislike.

Mrs. Skates answered in a purring tone:

"Well, dearest, I did it all for the best. It seemed to me that our dearest Mrs. Perkins was getting somewhat too old for the work of looking after you properly, and—"

"Oh, I'm not such an invalid as all that," said Miss Farebrother rather fretfully.

"Invalid! No, no. Heaven forbid," cried Mrs. Skates fervently. "But you're such a precious treasure to us all—" and she turned to Michael with a smile which he did not return, "that I'm sure your dear nephew will agree with me in saying that none but the very best care is good enough for you."

As Michael had not moved his head or allowed himself to be drawn into the discussion, his aunt addressed him :

"You remember Perkins, Michael?"

"Certainly I do, Aunt."

"Well, didn't you like her face better than Anson's?"

But before he could answer, Mrs. Skates broke in quickly :

"There's no question of comparing their faces. If you don't like Anson, she must go, no matter how worthy, how devoted she may be! And I will look out for another lady's-maid—"

But Miss Farebrother interrupted quickly :

"No, no, I don't want another. I can do without a maid : I'd rather. I hate fresh faces about me."

"But—"

"What I want done for me I'll have done by Jarman. I know her, and I'm used to her."

"But she's only a parlor-maid," urged Mrs. Skates softly. "She's hardly experi——"

But Miss Farebrother was obstinate. By the quick and restless glances which she threw in his direction, Michael began to surmise that it was the fact of his presence which gave the old lady courage to assert her own will against the friend who was gradually becoming a tyrant.

"I'll try Jarman, at any rate," she said. "And now, Blanche, I wish you'd go and speak to the doctor about this evening."

"Very well, dear," said Mrs. Skates, in her gentle voice. And this handsome, comfortable-

looking elderly lady, in her soft gray morning gown with the delicate lace which she, regardless of fashion, wore like a cap on her head and fastened under her chin by a tiny brooch, walked obediently to the door.

As she passed Michael, he rose stiffly, and opened the door for her. She smiled serenely at him; but sugary as she was, Michael had a sort of feeling that the long filbert nails on her plump white hands were longing to scratch his eyes out.

Left alone with his aunt, Michael stalked primly back to the hearth-rug.

"I am entirely of your opinion, Aunt, concerning the exchange of old Perkins for your present maid. May I ask whether you obtained her services through the medium of Miss Burns at the wool shop?"

Now Miss Burns, of the wool shop, and her sister and her niece formed an institution of which St. Mary's-on-Sea was proud. They were the proprietors of a library; they were reported to be able to match any shade of wool, silk, or spangles ever yet produced, and they had an agency for governesses, companions, and servants, which deservedly held the very highest character.

Miss Farebrother answered quickly:

"No, I wish I had."

"Then do you not think," suggested he, "that it would be as well for me to call on Miss Burns, and endeavor to ascertain whether she cannot provide you with a competent maid, and to replace the one you wish to send away?"

"But I don't want to have to wait a month be-

fore I get rid of her," said Miss Farebrother, in a low voice. "I don't like to say all I felt before Blanche, for fear of hurting her feelings, as it was she who engaged Anson. But really I dislike the woman so much, and I'm so sure she turns my things over and pries about, that I hate the sight of her, and should like to send her away this very day."

"That can be easily done," said Michael. "Since Mrs. Skates engaged her you can insist that Mrs. Skates shall send her away forthwith. Offer her two months' wages instead of one, if she will go to-day. If you put it like that to Mrs. Skates, and insist, I think you will find she will accede to your wishes."

By the look of relief that appeared in the little old lady's eyes, Michael was able to guess how much the presence of this unsympathetic woman about her had ruffled and annoyed the spoilt old lady.

"In the meantime I will go to Miss Burns—" he began.

But his aunt interrupted him.

"Do you know, Michael," she said in the same low voice as before, as if afraid of being overheard, "that I think I would really rather let Jarman do my hair, and not have a new maid at all. What I should like would be to have a companion, a lady, and a young one if possible. Do you think Miss Burns could find me one I should really like?"

Michael had turned his head away, to hide his face, the muscles of which he felt were not alto-

gether under his control. For an idea had occurred to him, such a bright, such a magnificent one, that he felt sure it must be shining in his eyes.

"I have no doubt, Aunt," said he, "that Miss Burns will use her best endeavors to satisfy your requirements. I will lay the matter before her in your own words. In the meantime, allow me to suggest that you should be very imperative in desiring Mrs. Skates to dismiss the woman Anson immediately."

"Oh, I will, I will," cried his aunt. "And—and you'll support me, won't you, if she makes any objection?"

Michael was touched, but he took care not to show it. He gravely assured his aunt that he anticipated no difficulties, and solemnly left her, to go on his errand.

In the meantime Mrs. Skates had hastened down to her husband with her very unwelcome tidings. She found the Doctor and Gaspard still in the breakfast-room, the latter laughing heartily at some humorous story her husband had just told him.

Although she appeared to make no sign to her husband, but just came up and stood placidly by without a word, it was curious that the doctor at once divined that something important had to be communicated to him. He got up abruptly, and went to the window, where his wife presently followed him, and then, with a word to Gaspard, the doctor opened the window and went out.

He and Mrs. Skates had scarcely exchanged a

dozen words when Gaspard saw the doctor turn purple with anger, and make a movement as if to shake his fist in the air. His wife, however, soothed him and silenced him, and it suddenly occurred to Gaspard, who had thought of following them out for a walk through the grounds, that there was something very suggestive of a couple of conspirators in the manner of the pair.

Again disturbed and perplexed by these surmises, just as he had been persuading himself that all was right with these pleasant people after all, Gaspard went out of the breakfast-room, and putting on his hat and overcoat, after learning from the footman that his brother had gone out, he left the house, and turned towards the town.

The air was crisp and cold, and the sun was shining. It was too early yet for the buds to have appeared on the trees, but there was a brightness in sea and sky which seemed to herald the coming of Spring.

Gaspard met a few people whom he recognized, but none to whom he cared to talk, until, turning into the road that led straight into the little town, he came in sight of his brother returning from it.

"Michael!" cried he, in surprise, "where have you been? And why didn't you tell me you were going out?"

"Well, I couldn't wait," replied Michael, who had for the time put away his spectacles, and who wore an air of intense excitement. "I had important business on hand, and if I had met you, I should have had to talk for an hour, as I shall have to now."

"What about?"

"Oh, need you ask? I've got my aunt to insist that that old arch-humbug Skates shall give a spiritualistic manifestation to-night, and I'm to be there."

"What!" cried Gaspard, aghast. "Does he do that sort of thing? Are you sure?"

"He does that, and probably every other sort of thing that's knavish and base," retorted Michael. "That's how he's been getting round the poor old lady; that's the means he uses for getting money out of her. It's the spirits who order her to 'shell out,' and the dear doctor is their very able lieutenant for the dispenser of her charities. Do you see?"

Gaspard was appalled.

"But you can't be sure of this!" said he.

"I can. Aunt told me so."

Both were silent for a few moments. Gaspard felt sick. After the friendly talk he had just had with the doctor, after the merry hour they had spent together over Skates' stories, the young man felt as if a douche of cold water had been unexpectedly applied to him.

They had turned back towards the little town, in order to be able to have their talk out before returning to the Abbey. As they passed the end of a little side road, where desirable villa residences, in red brick with stucco ornaments, flourished in staring rows, they heard an exclamation in a voice which they recognized at once as that of the Vicar's wife, whose letter had brought them over the seas.

"Good gracious, Gaspard, how you've altered!"

Both the young men turned with alacrity, delighted beyond measure to hear at last a voice they knew, a voice which belonged to a real friend.

But as they turned, and Mrs. Chalmers caught sight of Michael's plastered-down hair and Methodistical get-up, she uttered a little cry and stared at him in amazement.

"And you, too! Why, Michael, is it really you?"

Michael nodded and laughed as he shook hands.

"It's really both of us," he said. "I suppose you mean that I've changed for the worse, as much as Gaspard has changed for the better?"

The Vicar's wife, a round-faced, plump person, with shrewd, good-humored eyes, shook hands with both rather shyly.

"I've been worrying myself to death about you two," she said in a lower voice, as she went towards the town with them. "The Vicar's been scolding me for my bringing you back ever since I got your letter four days ago, saying you had both returned in consequence of my writing to you. Now do tell me, boys, are things all right up at the Abbey?"

"I think they're all wrong," said Michael simply. "Gaspard is inclined to doubt it, but I don't think you will be when you've heard what I found out this morning."

"But why are you got up in this extraordinary

way, Michael? Have you taken to field-preaching, or what?"

"Well, no, not exactly," stammered Michael, who guessed that his "masquerading" would meet with scant favor at the Vicarage. "But I've thought it necessary to tone myself down a little, to counterbalance Gaspard's frivolity."

The Vicar's wife stared from the one to the other.

"He never used to be frivolous," she said dubiously. "It was you, Michael, who were inclined to be wild."

"Well, I've reformed, you see," said he.

"And now tell me about your aunt," said Mrs. Chalmers, who had been evidently nervous since the beginning of the interview. "At least, no, wait till we get to the Vicarage. The Vicar's at home by this time, and you shall tell us all the news when we are both together. Then he can't say I've been filling your head with mischievous notions. That's what he's been saying the last few days," she added rather dismally.

So they all turned into a side road that led to the old house on the cliff, which the young men both remembered as a favorite playground of their boyhood's days.

"How's Madeline?" asked Gaspard, suddenly.

"Oh, she's quite well," said Madeline's mother, as she opened the gate between the high evergreens.

"Altered, I suppose, though? Why she must be quite grown up!" said Gaspard.

"Oh, no, she isn't," laughed Mrs. Chalmers,

as she led the way up the drive; "she's just the same—pinafores and all."

At that very moment a couple of heads appeared at one of the big bay-windows on the ground floor of the house, and Gaspard reddened as he raised his hat. The next moment the door was opened, and a group of three young people—a sturdy small boy, a girl to match, and Madeline herself, stood on the steps, with excitement in their eyes.

"Gaspard Farebrother! Michael!" cried the younger ones.

But Madeline said nothing; she only smiled her welcome, and blushed as her pretty blue eyes met those of the young men.

Now Mrs. Chalmers was quite wrong. Madeline had altered a good deal during the two years that had passed since she, then a girl of seventeen, bade good-by to Gaspard, then a lad of twenty-two. True, she was still allowed to wear her hair down, tied simply with a broad black ribbon; true, she still wore simply-made frocks of no particular shape, much in the fashion of those she had worn two years before. But these frocks had gradually been lengthening, and the blue eyes which met Gaspard's with such a sweet look of greeting were those not of a big child, but of a lovely young woman.

And Gaspard was conscious of the difference, conscious of a sudden bashfulness, of an inability to find any remarks more new and sparkling than, "How do you do, Miss Madeline?"

It had been plain "Madeline" and "Gaspard"

in the old days. But now the girl said in reply:

"How do you do, Mr. Farebrother?"

There—that was just the difference, beautifully defined and marked out. "Madeline" and "Gaspard" had become "Miss Madeline" and "Mr. Farebrother."

It was odd, though, that she should have turned quite simply to Michael, and said:

"How do you do, Michael?"

And that he should have returned her greeting with:

"How do you do, Madeline?"

And he added, without the least reserve: "Why, how pretty you've grown! I didn't remember that you were half so pretty!"

Mrs. Chalmers turned round in great indignation:

"What nonsense are you talking, Michael! Putting such notions into the girl's head! She doesn't want to be pretty; beauty is skin-deep, and nothing but a worry and trouble to everybody; and I'm heartily thankful none of my family have any, and I won't have them talked nonsense to!"

The good lady whisked both the young men into the house, and towards the Vicar's study, which was at the back of the house, facing the sea. Gaspard, at that moment wished the good lady—in the sea.

The Vicar ruffled up his hair at sight of the young men, and shook hands with them both in rather a perturbed manner.

"Well," said he, looking over his spectacles

first at one and then at the other, "it isn't true, is it, that you both left your ranch and came back here just on the strength of my wife's letter?"

Michael nodded cheerfully.

"Yes, we did," said he, "and right glad am I that she had the courage to tell us to come."

"Not tell, but suggest," said Mrs. Chalmers quickly, as she made her guests sit down, but remained herself fidgeting uneasily about the room. "At least, I didn't exactly mean to suggest to you that you should come, but only to put it to you whether you hadn't better!" she added, with evident distress.

"There, that's so like a woman; does a thing in a hurry without thinking, and then tries to shuffle out of the responsibility!" cried the Vicar, who was a cheery old boy, and a great favorite with everybody.

"Mrs. Chalmers needn't mind taking the responsibility this time," said Michael quickly, "for if it hadn't been for her hint it would have been very little use for us ever to have come back at all!"

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Chalmers, triumphantly.

"You don't say so!" said the Vicar.

"Come, Michael, you mustn't be so positive yet," said Gaspard. "We certainly have every reason to suspect that this Doctor Skates and his wife have been getting a great influence over my aunt; but we really have no proof at present that they ever had any intention of using that influence otherwise than well."

Mrs. Chalmers began to look nervous again, and the Vicar scratched his head with a quill pen.

"I'm sure I hope to goodness they will turn out all right," said he heartily; "not only for your sakes, boys, but also because when Ellen's right about a thing, especially an important thing like this, I never hear the last of it."

His wife made a little pretence at a good-humored sort of indignation, and Gaspard said:

"You mentioned in your letter, Mrs. Chalmers, something about a lawyer you saw coming up to 'The Abbey' with Dr. Skates one day. May I ask if you have ever seen him since, or heard of his being there again?"

The Vicar's wife answered less triumphantly:

"Well, I have seen him once there since."

And she hesitated. The Vicar shook his head.

"Now, Ellen, be honest," he said. "You know you found out that he wasn't a lawyer at all!"

"I know Mrs. Skates told me, when I asked if he were a lawyer, that he was not one," answered Mrs. Chalmers, with an obstinate look. "She said he was the secretary of some charitable society. But we don't know whether she told the truth!"

The Vicar raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Oh, artfulness, thy name is woman!" cried he. "You know, Ellen, you have no reason whatever for doubting Mrs. Skates' word."

"I have my instincts!" retorted his wife.

"Yes, but an instinct is not enough to base an accusation on!"

"I don't accuse; I only suspect," retorted Mrs. Chalmers vigorously.

"But you take very good care to communicate your suspicions broadcast, eh?"

"Not broadcast," protested she, doggedly, "though I do tell these boys, and more than that, though you've made me very uncomfortable about it, I do think I was right in writing to them as I did. There!"

When Michael had told these good people of the interview he had had with his aunt that morning, they both looked grave, though the Vicar would not commit himself to any definite opinion. He tried hard to conceal his amusement at Michael's "masquerading as a pedantic young prig;" but Mrs. Chalmers was very angry about it, said that even if the Doctor were a hypocrite, that was no reason why he should be one, and threatened to betray him to his aunt.

But she did not frighten Michael.

"You won't do that," said he; "You're too good-natured, you know you are." And he sat on the arm of her chair, and coaxed her, and then put on his spectacles, and looked at her through them while he went on talking, until she could not meet his eyes for laughter.

And then they both got up to go, though Gaspard showed great reluctance in declining the Vicar's invitation to luncheon.

Gaspard tried in vain to get another glimpse of Madeline on his way out. He asked if he couldn't see the children. But Mrs. Chalmers was inexorable. They were at their lessons, she said, and

had better not be disturbed. And as she immediately disappeared into the room where they all were, Gaspard in vain craned his neck as he went down the drive, looking wistfully at the window where he had previously seen the Vicar's pretty daughter.

CHAPTER VI.

It was Michael, however, who made the first reference to Madeline.

"How wonderfully little Madeline has improved in looks!" he said, as soon as they were outside the gates.

"Yes," said his brother laconically.

"I never thought she was going to turn out particularly handsome, though, of course, the Vicar's been a good-looking man before he grew so stout, and she, with her fair hair and blue eyes, takes after him."

"Yes," said Gaspard again.

"Not that it's a type I'm particularly gone on," went on the younger brother, with a very young man's lofty criticism. "I like something more fragile-looking myself. Now, my little Dresden china shepherdess at the bookshop——"

"Oh, bother your bookshop shepherdess!" cried Gaspard, impatiently. "One knows very well what she'd be like really!"

Michael burst out laughing, rather mischievously.

"Oh, all right," said he. "I'm wrong, I dare say. I don't know a good-looking girl when I see one, very likely. Very likely!" he added to himself with some loftiness.

Gaspard dismissed the subject with a gesture of the hand.

"Why didn't you tell the Vicar and his wife about the seance to-night?" he asked, suddenly.

"Well, perhaps because I look upon it as a thing so important that I'd rather not discuss it beforehand. It will be a pretty good test, don't you see, as to whether he is a mere trickster or not. So I must know a little more before I care to chatter about it."

Gaspard admitted this with an uneasy nod of the head. He had already himself come sufficiently under the influence of the Doctor's genial manner and keen sense of humor to hope very strongly that nothing would be found out against the pair. At the same time he could not but admit that Michael's experience had been rather more likely to excite suspicion than his own. He inclined, on the whole, to the belief that the Doctor himself was "all right," and that if there was any cunning in the pair, it belonged entirely to Mrs. Skates, and not to her genial old husband.

When they got back to the "The Abbey," it was luncheon time, and Miss Farebrother was already in the smaller dining-room, expressing some irritation against them both for being late.

Michael thought he saw, under Mrs. Skates' placid serenity of manner, certain signs that she was ill-pleased. After luncheon, in fact, she

thought proper to confide in him the reason of her annoyance. Coming up to him playfully, when Miss Farebrother and the Doctor had left the room, she said:

"You are a very naughty boy, Mr. Michael, and I'm really quite angry with you."

"In what way, Mrs. Skates?" asked Michael, looking down at her through his spectacles, "have I had the misfortune to incur your displeasure?"

"Oh, you needn't talk like that, you bad, wicked fellow, when you don't care a bit!" answered she, with the same stereotyped smile as ever.

They had drawn into the window, to be out of the way of the servants, who were now clearing the table. Gaspard had also come into the recess, and was looking out into that very small portion of the garden which was visible from the window.

"It was you," went on Mrs. Skates, still in most amiable protest, "who persuaded your dear aunt to send away one of the cleverest and most devoted servants she's ever had. Now, don't attempt to deny it; for Miss Farebrother admitted it herself. She told me you insisted on poor Anson's being sent away this morning, this very morning, and I've had to tell the poor dear thing she must go back to London by the four o'clock train."

Michael was quite willing, as his aunt plainly desired, to take the whole blame of this dismissal on his own shoulders, and he did so, with an elaborate and solemn expression of his belief that Anson was too depressing a person for her society to be good for Miss Farebrother.

As they stood there in the window, and he looked down into the serene, fair face, with the long wavy curtains of soft gray hair half covering the cheeks on either side, he was struck with the extreme youthfulness of Mrs. Skates' face compared with the hue of her hair, and he wondered how it was that, while her figure had gone to seed altogether, and had assumed that rotund shapelessness so unfortunately common in ladies of fifty or thereabouts, her cheeks, or what could be seen of them, had none of the flabbiness which usually goes with such a figure. And it occurred to him to think that Mrs. Skates must have been a very beautiful woman in her youth.

She was very pleasant and good-humored about the dismissal of Anson, after all, and he was conscious that she was taking his interference in his aunt's concerns very well. He took care to say very little himself, having an undefined impression that she suspected him, and that she was anxious to find out whether in the course of animated conversation his assumed pedantry would peel off.

When she left the room, which was not for some time, Michael turned to his brother, and was about to speak to him, when Gaspard anticipated him by crying, in a breathless voice, full of interest, as he looked out of the window :

" By Jove, what a pretty girl ! "

Michael stalked to the window at a slow pace, and looked out in his turn. But the person so flatteringly alluded to had already disappeared into the big rustic Gothic porch before the house

entrance, and he caught only a glimpse of a neat little figure, very soberly clad in dark blue serge and a black cloth jacket.

Gaspard turned to his brother.

"I suppose," said he, "you would have said she wasn't a patch upon the bookshop girl?"

"Perhaps!" said Michael, whose eyes had suddenly become luminous.

And then he went quickly out of the room. In the hall he met the footman, who was showing the young lady into the breakfast room.

"No," said Michael, quickly, "show the lady into the drawing-room."

The man obeyed, and a few moments later ushered into the drawing-room the pretty girl, whom he announced as:

"Miss Bell. From Miss Burns."

Miss Farebrother and her two courtiers looked up in surprise, and the old lady uttered a little exclamation.

"So soon!" she murmured.

Mrs. Skates seized the situation in a moment.

"Shall I take her into the breakfast-room and see her for you, dearest?" she whispered, while the genial Doctor eyed the newcomer with discreet approval.

"No, no," said Miss Farebrother, quickly. "If you and the doctor——"

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Mrs. Skates, for once allowing her displeasure to peep out in her manner, as she added: "Some young person chosen by your nephew, I suppose?"

Miss Farebrother did not answer. She liked

pretty faces, and the look of modest confusion on the fair features of the young visitor pleased her enormously. As soon as the Doctor and his wife had left the room the old lady put out her hand:

"Come here, my dear, and sit by me," she said.

Miss Bell took the chair pointed out to her, and tried to smile. But it was rather a watery little attempt, and she bit her lips suddenly, and looked at the fire.

"There, there, don't cry, child," said the old lady, kindly. "I didn't expect any one so soon, but I'm very glad to see you. Did my nephew see you this morning? He said nothing about it."

She had her suspicions aroused by the fact that the girl was so very pretty; her soft brown hair, large dark eyes, and delicate features formed a picture which would appeal particularly to impressionable youth. But Miss Bell turned to her in surprise.

"Your nephew!" she said, puzzled.

"Yes. How was it you came?"

Miss Bell shook her head in bewilderment.

"Indeed, I don't know," said she. "It was only about two hours ago, when I had just come in from a walk—I live at Cliffgate, in lodgings by myself——"

"By yourself?"

"Since my father died. He was a Major in the —th," said the girl.

"I see, I see, go on."

"A Miss Burns was announced. She told me she had heard I had an idea of doing something—

I don't know how she knew, and she didn't tell me—and that she wanted to find some one to be a companion to a lady. And she asked me whether I would care to come and see you this afternoon. So I came," said the girl, simply.

Miss Farebrother was touched.

"Well, I'm very glad you did," she said, looking with favor at the young girl's charming face. "I should like you to come and live with me. Do you think you would like it?"

Miss Bell looked at her and smiled.

"I'm sure you would be very kind," she said. "But I don't know whether I should be accomplished enough for you."

"I don't think you would find me very exacting. Do you read aloud well?"

"Pretty well, I think. I used to read to—to poor papa."

"And you play, I suppose?'

"Yes; but I can't sing."

"That doesn't matter. I don't care much for singing, except the very best. I should like to try you. But, dear, dear!" The old lady laughed, and looked at her with a comical expression. "I don't quite know how to tell you. But I suppose you've been told it before. You're very pretty, you know, and you might turn the heads of my two nephews!"

Both the old and the young lady laughed and blushed together, and Miss Bell said:

"Oh, I'll be very prim—indeed! And it would be rather hard if you wouldn't have me just because——"

"Because of something that isn't your fault. Well, so it would. And I don't suppose they will stay here long. So I think I shall try you."

"You'll want a reference, won't you?"

"Oh, I don't suppose there will be any trouble about that."

"No, there won't," said the girl, shaking her head and smiling. I'll give you the address of a clergyman's wife at Cliffgate. She knew papa and me very well."

"Oh, never mind that, my dear——"

"But I should like you to write to her," said the girl, earnestly, " because she can tell you just what I can do and can't do. I've often helped her in the parish."

"Very well. You may write down her address, if you like. And you must stay and have a cup of tea with us all now, and I'll introduce you to Dr. and Mrs. Skates, friends who are staying with me, and very dear, good people."

The girl's face changed a little.

"Are they the lady and gentleman who were in the room when I came?" asked she, with sudden shyness.

"Yes. You don't know them, do you?"

"No, oh no," said the girl quickly. "At least not to speak to. I have seen the gentleman before—at Cliffgate, I think," she added quickly, as she rose to go. "I think I'd rather not stay now, if you please. I should like to catch the next train back, as I came away rather unexpectedly."

"As you please," said Miss Farebrother, who

did not like the least interference with her plans. "Then I shall write to you in a day or two. By the by we didn't say anything about—terms, and, believe we ought to settle that."

"Oh—oh, I don't mind—anything you think right. I've got a little to live upon," said Miss Bell, blushing.

"Shall we say forty pounds, then?"

"Oh, that's too much, I'm sure!"

"I think not. You want to save your own money, you know, for a rainy day," said Miss Farebrother, who liked this modest little creature more and more. "We'll fix it at that, then, if we settle to live together."

The girl went away, flushed and happy, and never noticed the two faces that watched her from a window above, nor the other two that watched her from a window below.

"A regular little adventuress, by the look of her!" said Mrs. Skates to her husband, tartly.

But the doctor said nothing in reply.

Indeed, he had something very serious to think about, and might well be excused from showing much interest about the engagement of Miss Farebrother's companion.

As the day wore on, he made more than one attempt to turn Miss Farebrother from her purpose of holding a seance that night; but that lady, backed up secretly by the artful Michael, was obstinate. She wanted to convince her nephew, she said, of the doctor's powers; and after another consultation with his wife he made no further opposition to the old lady's wishes.

Gaspard was not asked to be present at the seance, and indeed his uneasy and silent manners still made him rather a wet blanket on the spirits of the party. For he could not dissemble, as his brother could; and now that his suspicions had been aroused afresh, he took refuge in taciturnity.

Michael, on the other hand, while still maintaining his solemn pedantry, held his own very well. He professed the deepest interest in the approaching manifestations of the doctor's occult powers, and though he felt pretty sure that that gentleman did not believe him, he succeeded in persuading his aunt that he was a devout believer.

It was in one of the little-used rooms in the east wing of the house that these four met after dinner that evening, and seated themselves round a table, by the doctor's orders, in such a manner that Michael was placed between the two ladies, and opposite to Skates himself.

His aunt had informed him that, in answer to their questions, it was the habit of the spirits, of whom there were no less than three in constant communion with them all, to give two raps to signify "No," and three to signify "Yes."

She also told him that one spirit, that of a lady of the name of "Laura," who had lived in the Abbey before it was rebuilt, was in the constant habit of showing herself to them, in answer to their call.

"I do trust," said Michael fervently, "that she will honor us to-night."

The seance opened rather unpropitiously. For a long time they all sat round the table in

the dark and the cold, in a silence absolutely unbroken, and it was not until Miss Farebrother had begun to grow fidgety and impatient that the doctor's voice, rather hoarse, rather tremulous, as if he was nervous, broke the monotony by saying :

" Is your spirit present, Laura ? "

To the great relief of everybody there came the longed-for three raps on the table.

" Are you happy and at ease, Laura ? " asked the doctor.

To everybody's perplexity and distress the answer came in two taps—" No."

" Is there a presence here unsympathetic to yours, Laura ? " next asked the doctor.

Then came the three raps that signified—" Yes."

The next question the Doctor put was a more delicate one. He evidently felt this, and his voice grew lower as he put it :

" Is there a spirit present less pure than your own, Laura ? "

Again they heard the fatal three raps, " Yes."

" Is it the spirit of Miss Farebrother, Laura, that is base and antipathetic to you ? "

Quick came the two taps, which meant " No."

" Is it that of my wife ? "

Again the answer came with two taps, " No."

" Is it my spirit that is evil and repulsive to your own purity ? "

Quick upon that answer came a most unexpected reply :

The three taps rapped out, " Yes."

Miss Farebrother uttered a little scream ; Mrs. Skates made a clutch at Michael. The Doctor, in a towering passion, jumped up, overturning his chair, and flung open the door, admitting the light from the gas outside.

"There—there is a hypocrite here, an impostor!" he almost shrieked, as his eyes rested on Michael, who sat calm between the two excited ladies.

"I fear so, indeed," was Michael's clearly given answer.

The Doctor, losing all self-command, made a rush for him, would have flown at his throat. Mrs. Skates, with marvelous ability for one so stout, flung herself round her husband's neck.

"Jamie, hush, calm yourself. Think—think what you're doing!" she implored vehemently.

CHAPTER VII

While Mrs. Skates was endeavoring to pacify her enraged husband, Michael kept his seat beside his aunt, who was trembling violently.

"Let me take you downstairs, Aunt," he said, quietly, while the Doctor still stormed, and Mrs. Skates still pleaded. "This scene is calculated to make you ill," he went on, speaking more loudly, and with a significant emphasis which added fuel to the wrath of Dr. Skates.

Under the prudent influence of his wife, the

Doctor had begun to grow a little calmer, but at this he allowed his anger to flame out afresh :

"No, no. You're an in olent young puppy, and not to be trusted. I will see Miss Farebrother downstairs," cried he.

But the old lady was already on her feet, and had allowed her nephew to draw her withered little hand through his arm.

"Thank you, I am going with Michael," she said, in a tremulous voice, as the Doctor approached her.

The light which streamed into the darkened room from the gas brackets in the corridor hardly sufficed to show the expression on the various faces. But Miss Farebrother's voice indicated a certain coolness towards the doctor, which warned both him and his wife to change their tactics. Instead of entreating, Mrs. Skates began to scold her husband, playfully, in her accustomed sugary-sweet manner; the Doctor, on his side, began to be apologetic.

"Well, well, I'm excitable, and when I am irritated I perhaps say more than I ought. No doubt there's some mistake; this is some joke, Mr. Farebrother, eh?"

And, promptly resuming his ordinary genial manner, the Doctor would have detained Michael, who was on his way out of the room, with his aunt leaning on his arm.

He got no reply from him, however; and as the Doctor and his wife followed the pair slowly along the corridor, Mrs. Skates suddenly gave expression to her annoyance with her husband's

hasty outburst, by pinching his arm so sharply that he winced, and uttered an exclamation of pain.

In the meantime, Miss Farebrother stopped abruptly, refused to go downstairs again, and told her nephew to take her to the rose room, her pretty boudoir at the northwest corner of the house.

She was so much agitated that Michael had the sense not to make any remark about the scene they had just gone through. He let her mutter to herself as he seated her gently on the sofa, and handed her her salts. She looked at him shyly, and seemed grateful for his silence. But, as he expected, she was not left in peace long. A light tap at the door soon announced the arrival of Mrs. Skates, who came purring up to the old lady, apologizing for her husband's loss of temper.

"You know what a hot-headed fellow dear Jamie is," she said, with a little coaxing laugh; "more like a headstrong lad of eighteen than a man of his age. Of course, your dear nephew was playing us all a trick, which the Doctor ought to have taken in good part. But——"

"What trick?" asked Miss Farebrother, sharply.

Mrs. Skates was rather taken aback. She stammered, reddened, and glanced sharply at Michael, who had retreated from his aunt's side on her entrance, and was standing, stiff as a poker, by the fireplace.

"Well, of course, it was your nephew who gave

those three raps!" she said at last. "It was just a little bit of fun, which Jamie ought to have laughed at. But these things are such realities to him; he is so earnest, so whole-hearted himself in his pursuit of truth, that he cannot bear any sign of levity in such a serious matter."

But Miss Farebrother's face remained cold, perplexed.

"I don't understand," she began, slowly. "Why should you accuse Michael of playing a trick? Why should you doubt that he's as earnest as we are? If there's any trickery," and her voice rose a little on the word, "in the business, how do I know who is at fault?"

Mrs. Skates lost her self-command a little.

"I see he's been poisoning your mind!" she said, quickly.

Miss Farebrother repulsed the lady's plump, white hand, and looked at her almost sternly.

"He's not said a word to me about the matter," she said quietly.

There was a rather awkward pause. Mrs. Skates glanced at Michael in some alarm, but the young man remained silent, imperturbable. Miss Farebrother put her hand to her forehead wearily. She began to look ill and worried.

"If you'll ring for Jarman," she said, "I think I'll go to bed. And I beg," she said, turning to Mrs. Skates, and looking at her gravely, "that you will tell the doctor what I've told you, and ask him to be more careful how he brings accusations against other people. Good-night."

She had risen, and was walking across the room

to the door of her dressing-room, which was the middle one of the three apartments which she reserved for her own special use.

Mrs. Skates, who was looking rather pale, asked humbly :

"You'll let me come and kiss you, as usual, when you're in bed, dearest?"

The old lady hesitated. Michael was ill-natured enough to hope that she was going to refuse. But Mrs. Skates was so evidently suffering from real anxiety and distress that the old lady softened a little, and said, as she reached the door :

"Oh, yes, I suppose so."

Then Michael, who had received only a little nod from his aunt, walked to the outer door, and held it open for Mrs. Skates. She was conscious of the necessity of "making it all right with him," and she said in her sweetest voice, as she went out :—

"You won't bear me any malice for taking my husband's part, will you?"

"Not in the least, I assure you," said Michael, good-humoredly, as he followed her downstairs.

And it was true. While Gaspard inclined to the belief that the Doctor was a cheery old fellow, with little harm in him, and that it was his wife who was an artful and designing woman, Michael, on the contrary, looked upon the Doctor as a cunning adventurer, and rather pitied his wife for her position.

He did not feel inclined to meet Skates again that night, so he went off to his own room, where his brother soon joined him.

And again there was a slight disagreement between the brothers. Michael considered that the doctor was a humbug and impostor, who was trying by supernatural trickery to keep that influence over Miss Farebrother which he had already obtained; while Gaspard was rather inclined to look upon these manifestations as a joke, and to think that they were merely intended to amuse his aunt.

Gaspard contended that, if the Doctor's design in holding these seances had been a nefarious one, he would not have risked Michael's presence at one of them; while his brother, on the other hand, maintained that he dared not refuse to allow him to come, and that he had trusted in his own resourcefulness to avoid any such incident as the one which had taken place.

In the morning the two young men heard, with some dismay, that their aunt was too unwell to get up, but that she refused to see a doctor, and would allow no one but Mrs. Skates and Jarman to come near her.

It was in vain that Michael sent messages to his aunt, through Mrs. Skates, the only available messenger, begging that he might see her for a few moments. The Doctor's wife always came back with a deprecatory smile and shake of the head, regretting that the dear lady was really too ill to be disturbed.

The last time that she said this to Michael, the young man rose from the sofa on which he had been sitting, and without looking at the Doctor, who was sitting by the fire, deep in a scientific work, said, "Then I think it is my duty to re-

quest the Vicar to come and visit my aunt, that he may use his influence to persuade her to see Dr. Pearson."

Mrs. Skates changed color.

"Oh, there's nothing seriously the matter with our dear friend, or you may be sure that I myself should be the first to overrule her wishes, and insist upon sending for the doctor," said she.

"I'm sure of that," said Michael. "Nevertheless it is clear there is something gravely wrong when my aunt is so ill that she cannot see any member of her own family, and yet thinks herself so well that she has no need of medical advice."

"I assure you——" began Mrs. Skates again, earnestly.

The Doctor saw that it was time for him to interfere.

"Can't you persuade her, my dear, to see Mr. Farebrother, even if it's only for a few minutes?" asked he, in his genial tones.

He had already made the most ample apologies to Michael for his anger of the previous evening, but had tried in vain to draw from that young man a confession of his share in the scene.

Mrs. Skates turned to her husband inquiringly.

He went on, "I'm sure we can trust Mr. Farebrother to be discreet, and not to let her talk too much. Indeed, you can easily stop him, and order him out if she seems inclined to get excited."

"So," thought Michael, "we are to ha' a chiel amang us takin' notes."

He made no objection, however, and at once insisted that he should accompany Mrs. Skates

upstairs, and await, outside her door, his aunt's decision as to whether she would receive him.

In a very few seconds the Doctor's wife came out; she smiled sweetly, and held out her hand to Michael, as if he had been a little boy, whispering:

"She will see you, she says. I persuaded her."

"Thank you so much!" said Michael, with fervor, as he thought to himself, "I wonder if she tried very hard to get aunt to refuse to see me!"

They went in together, and found the little old lady not in bed, as Michael had expected, but sitting up in a warm dressing-gown in an armchair by the fire. Jarman, a sedate and almost stately woman, tall, gaunt, discreet, was standing behind her mistress's chair.

Michael uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise.

"What, sitting up, aunt! I am glad!" cried he, as he stooped to kiss her. "I understood you didn't feel well enough to rise."

The old lady laughed rather nervously.

"I thought I should like to try, just a few minutes ago, when Blanche had gone downstairs," she said, innocently giving Michael a clue to the reason why she had stayed in bed at all. "And Jarman said she didn't think it would hurt me, if I felt I wanted to!"

"I hope, love, you will not suffer from your rashness!" said Mrs. Skates, shaking her head in gentle reproof. "You're so full of spirit, so delightfully brave, but we must not let you overtax your strength."

"Why did you refuse to see me, Aunt?" asked Michael.

"I didn't refuse to see you," replied she, simply. "As soon as Blanche said you were outside I told her to bring you in."

Michael glanced at Mrs. Skates, who was blushing furiously, and said, before that lady could interfere:

"But I've sent you half-a-dozen messages this morning, asking if I might come."

"I thought it better," here put in Mrs. Skates, "dearest, to let you wait till the day was a little further advanced, so that you might have more time to recover from the effects of last night."

Miss Farebrother's face clouded.

"Ah, yes, last night!" she said fretfully. "I hardly slept at all. I got Jarman to make herself up a bed in the dressing-room, and she says I moaned half the night."

"I wish you'd let me come and sit up with you, dearest," said Mrs. Skates.

"No, no, no, I don't want anybody to sit up with me. I'm not ill. Michael," she turned to her nephew, "I've been thinking a great deal about you in the night—about you and your brother."

Michael obeyed her gesture, and came nearer, while Mrs. Skates, who had grown very pale, withdrew a step, to allow him to pass her. Then Miss Farebrother addressed the lady:

"You've been neglecting the doctor all the morning, Blanche. Now you really must give him a little of your society, or he'll be jealous.

This boy won't mind keeping an old woman company for an hour, will you, Michael?"

Her nephew bowed his head, and Mrs. Skates, doing her best not to let her discomfiture become too manifest, kissed Miss Farebrother's hand with great tenderness, and went out of the room.

There was a pause. Then the discreet Jarman asked if there was anything more she could do, and her mistress beckoned her to her side.

"You can go now," she said, adding in such a low voice that Michael rather guessed the words than heard them: "Don't go downstairs. Stay about the corridor somewhere, in case I should want you again."

And Jarman retired, leaving Michael wondering whether his aunt's confidence in her dear friends, the doctor and his wife, was as great as he had supposed.

However, as soon as they were alone together, she beckoned him to sit on a low seat near her, and said, in a voice which was not strong enough to reach much further than his ears:

"I'm very fond of Blanche, but I don't care to see quite so much of her, or of anybody, as I've had to see this morning. The Doctor's a dear, good man, but his wife presumes a little, I think."

Michael discreetly listened, but said nothing. He thought he should learn more by not asking too many questions.

"You must know," she went on, after a short pause, "that while you boys were away in America I made a fresh will." Michael inclined his head; nothing could well have exceeded the interest of

this statement to him. "It is a very difficult matter, you know, my dear Michael, to do what is absolutely the best thing for young people, especially for young men. I dare say you know that, if it had not been for your father's care, I should have been married, for my money and nothing else, by a man who turned out to be nothing better than a rogue."

"Yes, I had heard, Aunt," said he.

"Well, it has always been on my mind that I must take care that you and your brother should not be ruined in the same sort of way, or in one of the many other ways by which a young man can run foolishly through his money."

"People are wiser now, Aunt," suggested Michael, who had gradually begun to throw off some of his pedantic forms of speech when he found himself alone with his aunt.

"Well, you may be, but I shouldn't feel sure even of you. Twenty-two is no great age. At any rate, it has always been my wish to do what I could to protect you, in case I should die before you grew out of very young manhood. Do you see?"

The young man was touched by her tone of kindly solicitude. He just bowed his head and she went on.

"And I had always wished that I might find some friend, as clever and right-minded as your own father was, who would act the part to you that he did to me."

Michael could scarcely repress a start. He began to see what was coming.

"Well, there's Mr. Buckle!" he suggested, naming the head of the firm of lawyers who had always had the conduct of his aunt's business in the old days.

"I thought of him, of course. But he is obstinate and old-fashioned. He positively declined to take upon himself the responsibility," she said fretfully.

Michael looked at her interrogatively.

"What responsibility?"

"Why, what I wanted was to leave my property to him, in trust for you, that he might give you such allowance as he thought right until you had reached the age of thirty, or had married with his approval, and that, as each of you attained that age, you should each receive your share of the whole. Do you see?"

"I can understand that old Buckle——" said Michael, forgetting his pedantry altogether in his surprise, "wouldn't care for such a responsibility as that!"

"He wouldn't hear of it, and said no honest man would. So I made a will, under his instructions, with different provisions. But, as I told Dr. Skates and his wife, I was not satisfied with it."

"Yes," said Michael, seeing that a remark was expected of him, and not feeling able to invent anything more striking under the stress of the natural anxiety he felt.

"Well, we grew intimate, and when I found out what a good, as well as an able man he was, I thought to myself that I had found the very friend I wanted, one who would take upon him-

self the responsibility of being guardian to you, of playing a judicious father's part."

"And he, of course, fell in with your views at once," said Michael.

"Not at once. He begged me to wait, to think it over, as it was such a very important step to take. And even when I had thought it over, he made me write him a letter, asking him to undertake this responsibility. He thought it would be better, in case Mr. Buckle should be offended, you see, at his accepting the office."

"But he did accept the office?"

"Yes. And brought a solicitor from London to draw up the fresh will."

"How long ago was that, Aunt?"

"It was drawn up a little more than a month ago, and it's a fortnight since I signed it."

"You have signed it?"

"Yes."

"And it is in Dr. Skates's possession?"

"No. In that of this Mr.—Mr. Dennison, the lawyer."

"Well!"

Miss Farebrother looked at her nephew solicitously.

"I want to feel sure you both understand I've acted for the best for you," she said, betraying a little anxiety in her voice.

Michael perceived that the incident of the previous evening had been successful in rendering her somewhat uneasy about the Doctor. He knew better than to be virulent in his denunciations of that gentleman, so he said very quietly:

"I don't pretend that I, for my part, do feel as much confidence in the Doctor as you do——"

"You don't know him so well," said Miss Farebrother quickly.

"That's true. But may I ask one thing: does Mr. Buckle know of this second will?"

"N-n-no."

"Then will you let him know all about it, show it him, in fact? That's all I ask. If he approves, I can answer for it that Gaspard as well as myself will be perfectly satisfied."

"I can hardly suppose he will, after what he said before," said Miss Farebrother rather impatiently. "His views are different from mine as to the treatment of young men."

An idea came into Michael's head, but he found it rather difficult to put it into words. After a slight pause, he said:

"May I ask, aunt, whether it was not the doctor who suggested this second will to you, and not you who suggested it to him?"

A slight flush of displeasure appeared in the old lady's cheeks.

"It was quite my own idea," she began in an offended tone. "At least——"

Michael asked no more. That broken phrase was an admission. And he well understood how discreetly the Doctor had insinuated his own ideas into her mind, so that no doubt of their being originally her own had crossed her mind till that moment.

However, if he could once persuade her to get her own lawyers to read the second will, he felt

sure that they would find means to prevent her from impoverishing her own kindred and enriching an adventurer in the manner proposed. So he said again: "You have been kind enough, Aunt, to consult me about this, and I, on my side, confide in you frankly my belief that it is not safe for you to trust so absolutely any man of whom you know no more than you do of Dr. Skates."

"But——"

"Let me finish," said Michael. "Will you promise me, not to consult Mr. Buckle, or to be guided by his advice, but just to send for him and show him the second will? Put it into his care, in fact?"

Miss Farebrother hesitated a moment, and then gave way.

"Well, there'll be no harm done by that. He shall see it. I'll write to him to-day," she said.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Michael left his aunt to go to luncheon, he felt that he could scarcely pass the shining bald top of Dr. Skates's venerable head without administering such a sound blow as would have spoilt his powers of scheming forever. But instead of that he walked sedately to his place, and discussed the weather with the most vivid interest not betraying for a moment to the rather anxious eyes of the husband and wife how well informed he now was as to their intentions.

When luncheon was over, it was with no undue haste that he drew Gaspard out of the house and started by a by-path across the fields towards the Vicarage. Gaspard had jumped at the proposal with an alacrity which drew from his brother a dry laugh.

"How about my Dresden shepherdess, now?" he asked, with affected disdain. "At any rate you don't find me rushing off to Cliffgate at the pace of a greyhound every five minutes to look at her!"

Gaspard slackened his pace and frowned.

"Shepherdesses!" cried he. "What do you mean by your shepherdesses?"

"I mean only that you're crazy to see Madeline Chalmers again. But mark my words, Mrs. Chalmers won't be so ready to let her sing and play for you as she used to be, now that our prospects, both yours and mine, have run down to zero."

"Zero!"

Michael nodded. "I don't mean that she's one of your fortune-hunting mothers; but chaps like you and me, who've been brought up to think they needn't work very hard, and who find themselves suddenly without prospects and without a career, are just about the last sort of fellows that prudent women choose for their daughters."

And Michael told his brother the whole story of his interview with their aunt that morning.

Gaspard was aghast. He was at first for returning at once to "The Abbey" and calling in the police to turn out the Doctor. When he had re-

covered from the first shock, however, he adopted a counsel of despair.

"Let's go back to London, and become clerks, or boot-blacks," suggested he. His brother shook him roughly by the arm.

"Nonsense," said he. "The game's not up yet. I admit we're in very great danger, for the Doctor's been so precious artful, and has put himself in the position of having been persuaded against his will. But if only Aunt keeps her word and sends for Buckle, I think it will be all right. He'll prove to her that the idea was the Doctor's, and not hers. Or at least he'll take some steps to find out who and what the fellow is."

It was with heavy hearts that the lads reached the Vicarage, where they were shown into the drawing-room, and welcomed a few minutes later by Madeline herself, accompanied by a couple of younger sisters.

Gaspard seized the opportunity of a chat with his old playmate, who, in her new glories of young womanhood, had made such a strong impression on him. He asked if he might see the old schoolroom, where they had had so many games and dances in the past days.

"Oh, yes, you can see it, of course," she said as she led the way to the door; "but it's almost neglected now the boys have gone to Winchester. You'll find it looks very bare and miserable indeed."

They were going the length of the wide, flagged hall, and in a few moments they had reached the big outbuilding which had been added to the

house at the back. As she had predicted, the sight of it, when he stood inside the bare apartment beside the beautiful girl whose partner he had so often been there in "Sir Roger," gave him a strange chill.

There, in a corner, huddled up and broken, were the old school desks, and the forms which the Vicar's boys had used before Winchester claimed them for its own. There was the carpenter's bench, where Michael had made a doll's house which was the talk of the neighborhood for its "real" staircase and smoke-producing chimneys. There on the walls still hung the festoons of paper roses with which, with an ill-judged taste for ornament, Gaspard and Madeline had insisted on adorning the room on the last Christmas party that was ever held there.

"It does look different!" he said, when they had both contemplated the room in silence for a few moments. "One could believe that ghosts came out at night and danced here!"

An echo gave him back his last word.

"Ghosts!" cried Madeline. "You speak as if you believed in them!"

"Well, I'm not sure that I don't," said Gaspard cautiously. "At least, in America I heard some odd things, things that set one thinking. Spirits, they call them there, you know."

"Well, but the spirits that are supposed to haunt places don't come till after the persons are dead," said Madeline. "And we're all of us very much alive, you and I, and the boys and all!"

"Yes. I'm sorry you've given up the old

school-room, though. It makes one feel that the old times are so far behind us. So they are for that matter."

"How melancholy you've grown! You never used to be so low-spirited!" said Madeline.

"Everything looked so much brighter then than it does for Michael and me now," said Gaspard. "I suppose you know what a muddle things are in at the Abbey?"

"I've heard something, and I'm so very sorry," said Madeline. "Papa and mama have an idea that they have kept it all to themselves, but these things always leak out in a large family, like ours; you can never be sure that there are not half a dozen children within hearing, you know, when you talk secrets."

"And what do you think of it all?"

"I think," said Madeline, with the prompt decision of extreme youth, "that the Skateses are a pair of impostors, and that they mean to get hold of every shilling of Miss Farebrother's money if they can."

In spite of all he knew, and of all that Michael and he suspected, Gaspard was rather shocked by this plain speaking.

"Oh, I shouldn't like to think they were as bad as that," said he. "You know we really have no reason to suppose they're not well off themselves."

"Well, if I were you, I should get a detective to find out something about them," said Madeline boldly.

But Gaspard shrank from the suggestion.

"I'd rather throw up the whole thing," said he, in a tone of disgust, "and, in fact, that's what I mean to do. I shall go up to London and find myself something to do in an office."

"What? And leave these people to do as they like, and to rob you of what is rightfully yours? Michael won't do that, I'm sure!"

"Michael has more pluck than I, more daring, more energy. Besides, we look at these things differently. He thinks as you do of these people, while I'm inclined to think it was my aunt who insisted on getting them into the position they are in. Do you see? If so, surely she has a right to please herself. And it's degrading to hang on here, waiting on her caprice; it makes me mad."

"Well, I like you to feel like that, but I can't bear that you should lose your money. For it ought to be yours, as your aunt herself admits."

"I've got a little of my own, enough to start with, and I've got my share in the ranch. I should be quite satisfied with my money prospects, if only—if only they didn't make a difference to me in another way."

He paused, and his voice dropped a little. Madeline met his eyes, and looked away, and blushed. They had been boy and girl sweethearts, these two, and already she understood, now that they had met again, that the old affection had begun to grow into something newer, sweeter, stronger. She said nothing, but turned away, and began to pull up the blind of one of

the long windows, letting in the bright rays of the afternoon sun.

Gaspard followed her, took the cord from her hand, and as he touched her fingers, a thrill went through her. He had not meant to speak more clearly that day ; he had meant to go away and start in life on his own account first, so that he might speak out more boldly, more freely, but when their hands met he understood how it was between them, and knew that the new sensations which he felt in his own heart were in hers also.

And the impulse to say more was too strong to be resisted.

"If—if I get on a little—even if I'm never likely to be rich, will you—may I——"

The answer was already in her eyes, though it had not time to rise to her lips, when a hurried step outside made the girl start away from him, and say quickly :

"It's Mama !"

And in another moment Mrs. Chalmers burst open the door of the old schoolroom hastily.

As Madeline had instinctively felt, there was displeasure in her mother's face and voice, veiled indeed, but unmistakable, as she said, rather sharply :

"Oh, you are here, Gaspard. We've been wondering what had become of you. Michael wants to go back home, and I didn't know where to find you."

Gaspard, simple fellow, saw no reason for being ashamed of his feelings toward Madeline, and he would have spoken to Mrs. Chalmers there and

then of his love and his hopes, but that she made such a thing impossible by hurrying him off, and chattering to him so fast that he could not get a word in.

It was not until he and his brother were outside and on their way home that he began to perceive that there had been intention in her brusque volubility. Michael made it clear to him that the Vicar's wife had understood what he wanted to say, and had determined to prevent his saying it.

"But why? Why should she?" asked Gaspard hotly. "It was always understood, in a way, even when Madeline and I were boy and girl, that some day——"

"Ah, that was when you had prospects, my boy," said Michael shortly. "But I told the Vicar and his wife about the second will, and I must tell you that they consider the outlook for us desperately bad. They say the Doctor and his wife will get the best of us. And in the circumstances Mrs. Chalmers doesn't want to throw Madeline, the beauty of the family, away upon you. There, that's the truth of it, though it isn't pleasant hearing."

Gaspard was indignant, incredulous. Mrs. Chalmers was a good woman, and no fortune-hunter.

"Fortune-hunter be blowed!" retorted Michael airily. "Of course, she doesn't want to see Madeline tied for life to a struggling City clerk, with three or four hundred a year at the outside. That's not fortune-hunting; it's common sense.

It's what I should do myself. No, my boy, unless we can rout the Skateses, there's no Madeline for you, and nothing better than bread and cheese for life for either of us. You may make your mind easy about that!"

Gaspard raved, but he could get nothing more promising from his brother than that. Dr. Skates, said Michael, was not only a designing man, but a clever one, and one too who would probably turn out to be as unscrupulous as he was clever.

"But," said Gaspard, "Mr. Buckle will be down here in a day or two, and he will set matters right."

"Perhaps," said Michael, dubiously. "If—he comes."

"But Aunt Lucilla has promised to write and send for him!"

"Yes. But there are influences at work which may prevent her," said Michael.

Gloomily the brothers walked home. They saw nothing more of their aunt that day, but the Doctor and his wife seemed determined to outvie all their former efforts to be amiable and entertaining. Gaspard, however, was more reserved than usual, and upon Michael's assumed priggishness they could made no impression.

They all retired to rest early, but neither of the brothers could sleep, so much agitated were they by the excitements of the day.

It was between twelve and one o'clock when both of them heard a sound of soft footsteps in the corridor outside, going up and down, up and down. Gaspard was on his way to his door, to

see who it could be, when there came a soft tap at Michael's door. The brothers opened their doors at the same moment, and saw, by the light of a candle which she carried in her hand, Jarman, the maid, ghastly pale and with starting eyeballs, looking, in her gray dressing-gown, like a withered old witch.

She seemed almost choked by terror.

"Oh, Mr. Michael, come down to Miss Farebrother's room, please. There's a-a-something, a spirit, ghost, something terrible, in her room, by her bedside."

"Nonsense. It's some trick," said Michael in a low voice, as he began to hurry downstairs with her.

Gaspard followed; but when they reached the door of Miss Farebrother's room, they found it locked. So was the door of the dressing-room, and that of the boudoir beyond. Michael pursed up his lips.

"Ghosts don't lock doors," said he shortly, in a low voice. Then he called his aunt softly by name.

There was a pause of a few seconds, and then Miss Farebrother's voice answered calmly:

"What's the matter?"

"Your doors are all locked. Are you all right?" said Michael.

"Of course I am. Good night."

Michael and Jarman looked at each other. But Gaspard had disappeared.

Standing for a moment behind the others, near one of the corridor windows which gave upon the

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garden at the back of the house, he saw a faint, peculiar light on the tall trees and shrubs at the other side of the lawn. A moment's reflection was enough for him to decide that this light was thrown from the windows of his aunt's room, and remembering that it was one of her fancies never to have either her blinds or her curtains drawn at night, he ran downstairs without passing his brother or Jarman, unlocked one of the garden doors, and ran quickly across the lawn. He soon saw that he was right. The faint rays streamed out through the windows of Miss Farebrother's bedroom, aud it struck him that it was the strangest, coldest light he had ever seen. Something that chilled his blood and made him shiver: some strange-looking, unearthly figure, indistinct, eerie, moved in the center of that strange light.

Gaspard stared up from the lawn below, with quick-drawn breath and staring eyes. Then, with an inspiration, he turned to the still almost leafless trees which bordered the lawn, and decided from one of them to get a better view of what it was that stood, swaying gently, as if moved by every breath of air, in the pale circle of dim greenish light in his aunt's room.

It must be some trick, surely, he thought. The figure, when he got a better view of it, would prove to be that of Mrs. Skates, or of the Doctor.

So he climbed up the tree that offered the easiest ascent, and looked full into the window of his aunt's room.

The sight that met his eyes froze his blood.

The figure he saw was not earthly, not of solid flesh. Filmy, transparent, shining in the darkness of the room around her with a pale, supernatural light, not standing, but swaying midway between floor and ceiling was the spiritualized, ethereal form of a tall and beautiful girl, slender as a reed, willowy, graceful, with her long black hair falling in a shadowy mantle about her shoulders.

Gaspard held his breath. The figure moved gently, raised a transparent white hand slowly, moved its pale lips, its head. Then, while he still watched, he perceived the outlines of the figure growing dimmer; they mingled with the shadows behind. And so, while his staring eyes were fixed on what he still saw of it, the figure began to melt slowly away on the same spot, till it faded altogether into darkness.

Scarcely able to move for the horror and sickness which had seized his very heart, Gaspard half climbed, half fell to the ground.

CHAPTER IX.

Across the now dark lawn Gaspard went, trying to collect his thoughts, trying to find out what he himself believed concerning the apparition he had seen.

He was not superstitious, and he had the best possible reasons for thinking that the artful Doctor and his wife might have discovered some way of working upon Miss Farebrother's imagination by

means of an illusion. But for all that his mind was clouded with doubt; and he asked himself how this spectral figure could have been produced, and even whether it were really the result of trickery at all.

Re-entering the house, he did not forget to lock the door again before running quickly up-stairs. But so much had his imagination been excited by what he had seen that, as he went quickly along the darkened corridor, his fancy suggested more than once the sound of soft footsteps and the rush of air made by a passing figure.

He found Michael and Jarman still waiting outside his aunt's door. Jarman had a candle, but they had no other light, for neither had thought of lighting the gas.

"Where have you been?" asked Michael, impatiently, but keeping his voice in a low key. Then, suddenly perceiving his brother's disturbed countenance, he said, quickly: "Why, what's the matter?"

Gaspard shook his head and waved his hand. He was still so unnerved that he wanted to collect himself a little before trusting himself to speak. So he merely pointed to his aunt's door, and raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

"Nothing's happened," Michael said shortly, replying to the unspoken question. "We can just hear a sound now and then as if aunt was talking to herself. I can't understand it. I've called out to her once or twice, and she has answered me at once, quite calmly and coherently. And that's all."

The brothers had withdrawn to the opposite side of the corridor, which was wide at this point, so that they could speak and listen without fear of being overheard. Jarman with her candle, statuesque and immovable, quite herself now that she was not alone, still stood by her mistress's door.

Suddenly they all three started on hearing Miss Farebrother's voice addressing them. She was evidently close to her door.

"Michael!" cried she, "are you there still?"

"Yes, aunt."

"And who else? Who's with you? I hear talking," she said, imperiously.

"Gaspard's here with me, and Jarman," answered Michael, crossing to the door as he spoke.

"And what are you all there for? What made Jarman go away?"

Michael hesitated for a moment.

"She woke up in a fright, I believe, aunt, and —and had a fancy she heard a noise or something. So she ran out in the corridor, and we heard her and came down to see what was the matter. Then we found all your doors locked, and we wondered why that was."

"All my doors locked!" echoed Miss Farebrother. "Nonsense. Go to bed, all of you, at once."

"Mayn't we come in for a moment, aunt, just to assure ourselves you're all right?"

Miss Farebrother hesitated, only for a moment, however.

"Yes, you can come in if you like to be so stupid," she said in a grumbling tone.

"You'll have to unlock the door," suggested Michael.

As his aunt came back to the door in order to turn the key, Michael made a hasty sign to Jarman that she was to remain outside on the watch. The next moment the door was unlocked, and the brothers entered the bedroom together.

Their first look round showed them that there was no person in the room except Miss Farebrother and themselves. The curtains of the windows, drawn back as usual, lay flat against the wall, affording no hiding-place; Michael glanced quickly round, and then sprang towards the door of the dressing-room.

"Where are you going?" asked his aunt quickly. But Michael had already disappeared, and she turned in surprise to his brother, "Is he mad?" she asked shortly.

Gaspard looked at her.

He noticed that Miss Farebrother, who was wrapped in a woolly pink dressing-gown, with the coquettish little knots and ends of ribbon that she loved, was looking strangely happy and peaceful. There was an unusual brightness in her eyes, and little trace of the impatient irritability which she generally showed when she was disturbed.

He could only stammer in reply to her questions, and listen, in some perturbation, to Michael's blundering footsteps in the next room, where he could be heard overturning chairs and knocking against tables in the darkness. Miss Farebrother laughed a little. "He must be mad, I think. And you, what's the matter with you too? You

look as if you'd been frightened out of your wits."

Gaspard looked at her earnestly.

"Aunt, has anybody been with you?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

She smiled at him, and did not at first reply. In the meantime Michael, flushed and sullen, came back after his blundering excursion into the two adjoining rooms. Then Miss Farebrother turned to him, and laughed in gentle mockery.

"You're the two oddest young men I've ever heard of," she said, as she tranquilly seated herself beside the dying embers of the fire, as if resigned to this invasion. "Perhaps you will kindly let me know how long you mean to keep me up?"

She had lighted the gas before they came in, so that they could see each other plainly, and note the strong contrast between the old lady's calmness and the perplexity on their own faces.

They were hesitating what to reply to their aunt when they heard a sound outside the door which made them all start. Michael opened the door and uttered an exclamation. There, lying in a heap, with her extinguished candle a few feet away, as it had evidently fallen out of her hand, lay poor Jarman, unconscious, between the bedroom and the dressing-room doors.

Michael was for taking her up into her own room; he wanted to know what it was that had frightened her, and reduced her to this state of collapse. But Miss Farebrother would not allow this. She insisted that Jarman should be brought

into her bedroom, and Gaspard and Michael, though they would willingly have waited, were dismissed by her very sharply before the maid came to herself.

The young men went up-stairs again in the worst of humors. Gaspard indeed was restless and uneasy, half-inclined to fancy that it was indeed a spirit that he had seen through the windows of his aunt's room.

Michael, however, was more than ever convinced that Miss Farebrother had been victimized by another trick, and that the tall, slender girl with long black hair and beautiful face was some person whom the artful Skates and his wife had introduced into the house for this purpose.

"But I tell you she didn't look like a live woman," persisted Gaspard earnestly. "I seemed to be able to see through her, and she didn't go away; the figure melted before my eyes on the spot where she stood."

"Then it's a Pepper's Ghost affair," retorted Michael shortly, "the sort of thing one has seen at booths at a country fair."

Gaspard made an irritable gesture.

"Yes," said he, "but for that ghost illusion you must have the real person, and a great big apparatus besides. You want a large sheet of glass for one thing, that couldn't be brought in and out of the room without its being seen. Don't you know that?"

Michael did know it, but he was not convinced.

"I don't say that is the particular trick that's been played in this case, but I do say it's a trick

of some sort," he said obstinately. "And I'm going to hunt the place out till I get to the bottom of it."

In fulfilment of this intention he at once took a candle into the room above his aunt's bedroom, a long unused apartment, which had once been a play-room. Here, by the light of his candle, he carefully examined every board of the floor, to see whether there was any chink or cranny, any trap-door or other devise by which communication could be held with the room below.

His search was, however, entirely fruitless, and so was a tour he made of the house, with the object of finding any trace that might still be left about of the admission of a visitor.

The next morning Michael took an early opportunity of interviewing Jarman as to what had caused her to faint in the corridor on the previous night. She was an old servant of the family, and as honest as the day; but alas for Michael! she had one of the usual qualities of old family servants—a reticence which nothing could break through. She had evidently been ordered by her mistress to answer no questions which might be put to her by the two young gentlemen, and stolidly, implicitly, she obeyed.

Michael soon guessed the cause of her unwillingness to speak, and said shortly:

"My aunt has told you not to answer our questions, eh?"

A faint flush rose in Jarman's leathern cheeks, and she looked down. All she said was:

"Indeed, I haven't anything to tell you, Mr.

Michael. I fainted away, I believe. I suppose it was because I was tired out."

"Oh no, it wasn't. It was because you saw something. Something that gave you a fright. Now come, was it a ghost?"

Jarman trembled, but she only said:

"Ghosts, Mr. Michael! I don't believe in such things!"

"Yet you saw a ghost, or something like one, standing by my aunt's bed?" urged he.

"It was my fancy, I suppose," said the woman, looking uneasily round her, but with her lips still pressed tightly together with that obstinate look which put a bar to his hopes of making her speak out.

"Tell me, was it a girl you saw?" Michael went on, seizing her by the arm, and looking into her face. "A tall girl with long, dark hair, eh?"

"I don't know, I don't know what it was. It was the curtain, most likely, that I fancied was a figure. Indeed, indeed, Mr. Michael, I don't know what it was, so it's no use asking me."

And he had to give up the attempt to make her speak with a muttered exclamation complimentary neither to his aunt nor to her.

As he expected, he soon found that a change had come over Miss Farebrother's intentions since the previous day. She came down-stairs in the course of the morning, after breakfasting, as usual, in her own room, and her younger nephew seized the first opportunity of being a moment alone with her to ask whether she had carried out her intention of writing to Mr. Buckle. A look

of annoyance appeared instantly on the face of the old lady who had been very snappish to everybody, including, so Michael was glad to find, her dear friend Mrs. Skates. Only the Doctor had, in a measure, escaped her displeasure.

"Mr. Buckle!" echoed she, icily, raising her eyebrows. "What should I write to Mr. Buckle for?"

"You know, my dear aunt," said her nephew, assuming his most priggish tone and manner, "you informed me yesterday that it was your intention to inform Mr. Buckle of certain dispositions which you had made without his knowledge."

Miss Farebrother pinched up her lips.

"Did I say that?" she said, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "Well, then I've changed my mind. I have nothing to say to Mr. Buckle, and I don't intend to inform him of anything I've done. It's open to you to do so, if you like, of course. But I don't know of what advantage it would be to you, I confess."

Michael, scarcely able to control his feelings, turned abruptly from his aunt. A cold chill went down his back when he saw, standing just inside the room, still as a statue, and with the eternal smile upon her face, the ever-watchful Mrs. Skates. He had not heard her come in, but he felt pretty sure that she had heard the few words which had passed between his aunt and himself, and when she came purring up, with the heavy-footed yet gliding step he knew so well, and murmured. "Is there anything I can do for you, dearest?"

he felt that he should have liked to put his hands on her broad, comfortable shoulders, and race her out of the house, and down the road and into the sea.

He found out his brother, and the two held a consultation, which resulted in their both making up their minds to leave the Abbey without further delay. Gaspard was delighted to find his brother ready to do this.

"It's humiliating," said he. "It's disgusting that we should hang about here as we're doing, waiting for dead men's shoes. It isn't as if we were cripples, or even as if we were without a shilling. Let's be off this very day, see old Buckle, let him know what's going on here, and then turn to and find something to do up in London."

"Why not go back to the ranch?" suggested Michael.

But he himself did not urge this with any great enthusiasm, and Gaspard received the suggestion without any enthusiasm at all. Then they both looked at each other askance, and began to laugh.

"It's Madeline!" said Michael, nodding at his brother.

"It's the Dresden shepherdess!" said Gaspard, nodding back.

"Well," admitted Michael, "I own I should like just to see how my shepherdess gets on with Aunt Lucilla! And whether these Skateses will do their best to drive her away!"

Gaspard stared at him in bewilderment for an instant, and then slapped his knee.

"By Jove!" he cried, while his brother, recol-

lecting himself, made a grimace and bit his lower lip. "I see! Your Dresden china shepherdess is the awfully pretty girl who's coming here as companion to aunt. And you sent her here, of course! You are an artful customer, Mike!"

His brother gave him a thump on the back, half angry, half amused.

"S-sh! Hold your tongue!" said he, in a low voice. "These walls are honey-combed, and I don't want our precious friends, the Skateses, to know I had a hand in getting the little girl here. And she doesn't know it herself, mind. I went to Miss Burns, and gave her instructions to get Miss Bell, if she could, to come to my aunt, but not to say who sent her. I should like to think there was somebody in the house who was not on the side of these adventurers, when we have to leave the poor old lady at their mercy."

Gaspard looked grave.

"If I thought as badly of them as you do," he said, "I wouldn t leave the house on any account. I'd risk the misery and discomfort of the position, and everything. Why, man alive! If things were as bad as you fancy, aunt's very life wouldn't be safe! You say this last will of hers leaves everything to the Doctor in trust for us. Well, what's to prevent him, if that is so, and if he is the rogue you think, from murdering her to——"

"S-sh!" whispered Michael, sharply.

And then the two brothers looked at each other with excitement and dread in every feature.

"I've thought of that myself," said the younger at last in a low voice. "But even I don't think

as badly of the old boy as that. There's many a degree of roguery between enjoying what you can get of a kind but rather silly old lady's money, and——what you think."

His voice sank to an awe-struck whisper.

But Gaspard took the possibility even more seriously than his brother did.

"Look here," said he, at last, "this is too grave a business to be settled off-hand by you and me. Before we do anything, leave this place or take any step whatever, we must consult Mr. Buckle, tell him the whole state of affairs, and ask his advice."

"All right," said Michael. "We will. You and I will go up and see him to-morrow."

But Gaspard suggested an amendment to this proposition:

"Not both of us," said he "You've put such ideas into my head that I should feel uneasy if we were both to be away from the house at the same time. I hope it's all right: I may say I believe it is. But I can't feel comfortable till I've heard the opinion of an outsider. So you shall go up to-morrow. It was you who heard about the will from my aunt's own lips; then we'll be guided by his advice. If he says it's perfectly safe to leave her to these people, we'll pack up our traps and be off at once. As for Madeline, why, bless her heart, I believe she'll wait for me; and if only I have decent luck, she won't have to wait long!"

Michael rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"My love affair isn't so well developed as yours," he said after a pause. "But I own I

should have liked to see my little shepherdess again before going away! She's to come here on Monday, I believe. Couldn't we pocket our pride and wait here till then? It's only four days. And we really ought to get a chance to impress upon her that we want great care taken of my aunt, now oughtn't we?"

"H'm," said Gaspard, "well, we'll decide when we've heard what old Buckle has to say."

"By the by," said Michael, as he was on his way to the door, "Mrs. Skates heard me mention Buckle to my aunt, so she'll be on the alert as to what I am going to do when she hears I'm going up to town."

"Then don't say you're going up to town," retorted Gaspard.

The day passed uneasily for every one at the Abbey, except the Doctor, who was as cheery and genial as ever, and who appeared to be utterly unconscious that everybody was not as happy as himself.

Miss Farebrother was decidedly cross, Mrs. Skates was submissive and watchful; the two young men were silent and ill at ease.

At dinner that evening, the Doctor rather surprised the rest by announcing that he should have to go up to town on the following day, to order some new clothes. Michael instantly began to wonder "what was up."

"Why, Doctor, I thought you hated London, and never even went through it if you could help it," said Miss Farebrother.

"That's quite true," said he. "I hate the fog

and the smoke, the noise and the crowd. But even I have to confess that the London tailor is superior to his country brother, and you would have to confess the same thing, if I asked you to walk down the street with me in a frock-coat, designed and built by our local sartorial 'artiste.'

After dinner the brothers consulted together.

"You won't care to go up by the same train with him?" suggested Gaspard.

Michael shook his head.

"No. I shall go by the next. It's a confounded nuisance though, to have to miss the only decent train of the morning! I wonder what's in the wind!"

"Why, there's nothing so very extraordinary in his going up to his tailor's, is there?"

"Yes, there is. What does he want with new clothes? It's odd, too, that, so far as we can find out, he's never once been to town before since he's been down here!"

"Oh, come now, you're too suspicious for anything! You'll find something wrong in his going to the post-office to buy himself a penny stamp next!"

Michael, however, would not be convinced that the doctor was not influenced by some dark design.

The next morning Mrs. Skates drove the doctor to the station to catch the early express; but Michael who said nothing to anybody of his intention to go to town also, started by himself an hour and a half later, leaving Gaspard to make his excuses for his absence from luncheon.

The offices of Messrs. Buckle and Maddox

were in Lincoln's Inn, in one of the gloomies and barest looking houses of that gloomy and bare neighborhood. It was a dull, dark day, and Michael moped his way up the old staircase in a state of gloomy depression befitting the atmosphere. He had reached the first-floor, and was stretching out his hand towards the handle of the clerk's office, when a cheery voice behind him, a voice that he knew, made him start.

He had no need to turn to see that the genial person, talking and laughing heartily, who came out of Mr. Buckle's private office at that moment, shaking that gentleman by the hand as he bade him good-by, was Dr. Skates himself.

CHAPTER X.

Michael felt, as the old women say, that his heart leaped to his mouth. He did not turn round, and in the darkness he was able to flatter himself that he escaped recognition by the genial Doctor.

It was, however, with a sense of deepest despondency that he met the old lawyer, a few minutes later, when he was admitted into his office.

Mr. Buckle, who had not seen either of the young men since their return from America, did not, Michael was conscious, exhibit any particular enthusiasm of welcome to Michael.

"Ah, Michael!" he said, as he gave the young man two fingers, and looked him up and down, "so you're back in England. I've been hearing

something about you and your brother this morning."

And he glanced at some notes he had been making on a sheet of paper.

"From Dr. Skates, I suppose?" said Michael. "I saw him come out of your room just now. May I ask if you'd seen him before to-day?"

"Well, no, in point of fact, I had not," admitted the lawyer, looking at Michael over his spectacles.

And the young man leaped to the prompt conclusion that the astute Doctor had been beforehand with him.

"It seems that you and your brother have not tried to make yourselves very agreeable to your aunt and her friends!" said Mr. Buckle drily.

"He told you that, I suppose?"

"Well, he told me that you and your brother had taken offence at finding him and his wife staying in the house, and had taken to playing tricks on your aunt at night, by which she has been a good deal upset."

"Oh, indeed," said Michael, looking down, and exercising strong self-control.

"Well, what have you to say to that?"

"I think I should like to hear a little more of what the Doctor accuses us of before I answer you, sir," said Michael quietly.

"Oh, he didn't want to accuse you of anything. On the contrary, it seems he, and more particularly his wife, have taken a great fancy to you both, even to the extent of the lady's having proposed to leave her money to one or other of you."

Michael looked up quickly.

"Oh, indeed. Very kind of her," said he in a stifled voice.

Mr. Buckle looked at him with a slight frown.

"Is there any particular reason why you should sneer at the idea of a bequest from Mrs. Skates?"

"I think, sir," said Michael, "that there's a great deal more chance that Mrs. Skates will get a bequest herself than that she will leave one to us."

"Ah! Now we're coming to it," said Mr. Buckle.

"Yes, sir, now we are. This Dr. Skates, I suppose, has been making out to you that we're a pair of ill-conditioned, ungrateful rascals, who have been planting ourselves in my aunt's house, trying to upset all her arrangements, and making everybody uncomfortable."

"Well, you do seem to have succeeded in that last object, if it was your object," said Mr. Buckle. "It seems you consider yourselves aggrieved because your aunt has chosen to make fresh acquaintances during your absence, and that you have taken upon yourselves to disapprove of her having invited them to stay with her."

The lawyer paused, and looked at Michael, who only nodded, and said:

"Go on, please."

"Well, Dr. Skates very naturally resents your taking this attitude. He says that you and your brother have chosen to treat him as if he were an adventurer and a person to be mistrusted, and that you have made him and his wife so uncom-

fortable that, unless you alter your behavior, they will have to leave the Abbey."

"I wish to Heaven they would!" burst out Michael.

"Ah!" said the lawyer. "Then you admit your prejudice?"

"I admit my dislike, but I don't admit it's founded on prejudice," said Michael bluntly. "When we came back——"

The lawyer interrupted.

"By the by, what made you come back?" he asked sharply.

"Well, we'd been warned that things were not going on all right at the Abbey."

"And who gave you this warning?"

"I'd rather not say."

Mr. Buckle shrugged his shoulders.

"If it was some old servant, jealous of new friends and new faces——" he began.

"It was not a servant," said Michael. "When we came back we found my aunt entirely changed to us."

"I think she found some change in you, did she not?" asked the lawyer. "At least, I understand that you, Michael, thought fit to turn up in the guise of a Methodist parson, and to assume a particularly unpleasant and priggish demeanor. I confess I see no signs of it in you myself, but perhaps it is a disguise you only put on for special occasions."

Michael had indeed thought it better to drop both his new clothes and his new manner of speech for this visit to the lawyer, and it maddened him

to see how the charges were accumulating against him. After a short silence he said: "May I ask, sir, whether Dr. Skates told you that my aunt has made a fresh will?"

"Oh, yes. And it seems you resent that also. But surely she has a right——"

"And do you know that Dr. Skates is made sole trustee, and that my brother and I are to be left entirely at his mercy?" went on Michael.

"Yes, I do. But I don't see that that is the doctor's fault, since it appears it was your aunt's own wish to leave her property to some person in whom she could rely, in trust for you."

"Is it true that she suggested that you should be that person, and that you refused?" asked Michael.

The lawyer shook his head.

"As to a portion of her estate, yes, but not to the whole of it," said he.

"And do you think it is wise to trust a comparative stranger to such an extent?" went on Michael.

"A stranger, certainly not," said Mr. Buckle, promptly. "But not only is Dr. Skates not a stranger to Miss Farebrother, but he is, or appears to be, a man in every way suitable, if a guardian is necessary, for the office of guardian. He gave me the fullest particulars as to his family connections——"

"Which you have not had time to verify," put in Michael.

"But I shall do so," said Mr. Buckle rather severely. "I was going to add that he is a rich man, and therefore——"

"But how will you be able to verify that?" asked Michael.

The old lawyer grew impatient. He waved his hand in dignified protest.

"Are you here to put me under examination?" he asked sharply. "I repeat, Miss Farebrother has a right to choose her own friends, and to leave her property in her own way. And although I consider, in a general way, such a disposition as she has made not the best that could be made, it certainly seems to me, as far as I can judge, that there is nothing more to be said against Dr. Skates in the character of trustee than might be said against any other man in such a position."

Michael rose to his feet.

"Very well then, sir, I need not take up any more of your time. It was to consult you about this Dr. Skates that I came up here to-day. If you had not been prejudiced against me beforehand by this impostor——"

"Oh, I must really beg——"

"Oh, you'll find out that he is an impostor before long," retorted Michael recklessly. "I say, if you had been ready to listen to me, you would have seen that my case—our case, is stronger than you will allow. However, it can't be helped. I came to tell you that my brother and I have made up our minds to leave the Abbey, and to make a start in life on our own account, as, if her latest will holds good, neither Gaspard nor I will ever have a chance of touching a shilling of my aunt's money."

"Really, you must——"

"Oh, it wasn't about that that I came to trouble you. But I wish you to know that my aunt's maid, who was with her so many years, has been sent away by these people, the Skateses, and that my brother and I are uneasy at having to leave my aunt in the hands of two people whom we consider to be impostors and adventurers, especially as, in the present condition of affairs, they have everything to gain by her death. I won't take up your time any longer."

Michael bowed and went quickly away, but not before he had noted a slight change in the expression of the old lawyer's face, which showed that the calmness and deliberation with which the young man had been careful to utter these last words had had their due effect.

As he had nothing in particular to do in London now that his visit to the lawyer's office was over, Michael resolved to go back to St. Mary's-on-Sea by an early train, more especially as he was burning with anxiety to tell his brother how cunningly Skates had forestalled him.

After a walk, a luncheon, and a look at the shops, therefore, he got into a hansom and drove to Victoria, where, as he got out, he almost ran into Dr. Skates, who seized his hand with much heartiness, but showed such perfunctory surprise that the young man was convinced he had been recognized on the dark landing outside Mr. Buckle's office.

The Doctor insisted on walking into the station with him, though Michael, who was in no mood for his companionship, would fain have found

some excuse for dispensing with his company. An accidental and rather mysterious circumstance, however, soon set him free.

They had got on the platform, and the Doctor, talking loudly, cheerfully, and somewhat patronizingly, as was his wont, was making a leisurely inspection of the train from end to end before choosing a compartment for himself, when Michael noticed that a man whom they had passed once among the crowd on the platform, came back, and observed the Doctor and himself with a slightly furtive look. At first he thought this might be only a fancy; but when he noticed that, wherever he and his companion might be, the same man was always in sight, and always at about the same distance away, it occurred to Michael to look at him carefully. This he could do the more easily as he left the talking to the Doctor.

The suspicious-looking person was a thin young man, respectably but not very well dressed, who looked like a third or fourth-rate lawyer's clerk.

Michael soon convinced himself that it was the Doctor whom the man was watching, and he became exceedingly anxious to know what it was that made the worthy Skates such an object of interest to the stranger. Perhaps his own interest in his companion's chatter began to flag too visibly; however that might be, Dr. Skates presently followed his companion's gaze, and met the eyes of the thin young man.

And in an instant he stopped talking, walked on in silence for a few moments, and then, with a muttered explanation that he had forgotten his

ticket, darted across the platform where the crowd was thickest, and into the station.

The thin young man at once started in pursuit.

Michael followed, more interested than ever. After a few moments' chase, in which he lost sight both of the Doctor and the stranger, Michael came face to face with the latter, who was looking flushed and angry. He at once addressed him.

"May I ask," said he, "if you are looking for Dr. Skates?"

The young man stared at him suspiciously, and then looked round him again, without answering.

"No," said he then, shortly.

It occurred to Michael to wonder whether this man took him, Michael, for a confederate of the Doctor's who was conniving at his getting away. So he went on quickly:

"Not for Dr. Skates, the gentleman I was walking with just now? Oh, very well then. If it had been he, I could have told you where he lives, that's all."

And Michael turned away. He had only gone a few steps when the man came after him.

"I beg pardon," said he, "but I should be obliged if you could favor me with the party's address."

"Certainly. He's staying at the Abbey, St. Mary's-on-Sea, the residence of my aunt."

"Oh!" said the man, stepping back, and again looking doubtful.

"The name by which he is known there," said Michael, struck by a bright thought, "is Skates."

"Ah!" said the thin young man, "when I knew him it was Macdonald."

"And how long ago was that, may I ask?"

Again the man hesitated, but at last he said: "Two years ago. The fact is I had a writ to serve on him——"

The manner in which Michael's face lighted up showed him that it was quite safe to go on—"for seven hundred pounds."

"Was he a rich man when you knew him?" asked Michael shortly.

"He lived like one," replied the young man cautiously. "Called himself a Professor of Magnetic Healing——"

"That's the man!" murmured Michael.

"He gave me the slip then, and he's been lost sight of ever since. The Abbey, St. Mary's-on Sea. Thank you, sir."

And without waiting for any further parley the man raised his hat and disappeared into the station.

Michael had lost his train, but he did not care. He knew that the Doctor had managed to slip into it, for he perceived his head looking cautiously out for a moment, no doubt to ascertain whether his pursuer was in sight. Happily, the thin man had disappeared, and Michael had reason to hope that the meeting between himself and the clerk had not been seen by the Doctor. At the same time, it was by no means certain that that astute person had not found out the danger he was in, and Michael was now doubly anxious to get to

St. Mary's in order to find out whether this scare had been enough to drive the Skateses away.

As he went, however, doubts began to worry him again, and the knowledge that his antagonist was a clever and unscrupulous man made him ask himself whether Skates would not sail out of this difficulty as he had sailed out of others.

When, having got to St. Mary's-on-Sea by the next train, he caught sight of the thin young man walking across the road in the direction of the Abbey at a swift pace, having evidently come down in the same train as himself, Michael felt his heart leap up, and began to hope for an early checkmate to Skates.

If it could be proved that the Doctor had evaded payment of seven hundred pounds by a prompt disappearance, leaving no address, his position as a man of property was disposed of.

Just before the thin man reached the Abbey gate, Michael came up with him and put a question to him:

"Where was Skates, or Macdonald, living when you knew him?" he asked.

"In a street off Cavendish Square, sir."

"Was there a Mrs. Macdonald?"

"I don't know, sir. There was a niece, a Miss Macdonald, as her creditors know to their cost."

The same person, perhaps, thought Michael. But somehow it was rather a shock to associate this placid, dowdy, middle-aged lady with enormous extravagance. A doubt again crossed Michael's mind.

"Was she a stout lady," said he, "about half a dozen years younger than the Doctor?"

The man smiled.

"No, sir. She was a tall, dark young lady, with a beautiful figure; one of the slimmest figures, without being what you would call thin, you ever saw. And dowdy! No fear! Why, her dressmaker's bills would have swamped any man's fortune!"

Michael opened mouth and eyes at this intelligence. At that moment, as they entered the gate together, the figure of Mrs. Skates, in the full light of the illuminated dining-room, passed round the table, and was distinctly visible through the window, just before the servant drew down the blinds.

"Do you recognize that lady?" asked Michael quickly. "That's the woman who calls herself Mrs. Skates."

The man looked interested. He shook his head.

"No," said he, "that isn't the Miss Macdonald that I knew; she was half a head taller, and about a fourth of the size round, and at least twenty years younger."

"Perhaps in two years she's aged," suggested Michael.

The man looked at him and pursed up his mouth.

"Not the same lady, sir," he said. "Though there's a look about the features, too, as if this one might have been her mother."

Michael started. He suddenly thought of the

tall, slim, dark lady who had almost succeeded in persuading Gaspard that she was a ghost.

And a shiver went through him as he began to understand that there was a third party to the Skates conspiracy, and the most dangerous of all, since she managed to remain all but unseen.

CHAPTER XI

Michael and the stranger proceeded to the house together, and the former at once asked where Dr. Skates was, rather hoping to hear that he was out. But the answer came and dashed his hopes :

"He's in the drawing-room, sir, with Miss Farebrother."

It was plain, therefore, that the Doctor meant to stand his ground. Furious, and reckless of consequences, Michael told the thin young man to follow him, and at once led the way to the drawing-room.

"There he is," said he, as he threw open the door, and pointed to Dr. Skates, who was eating cake as he stood before the fire, and entertaining his hostess with some story at which she was laughing heartily.

The thin young man advanced into the room. Miss Farebrother looked at him inquiringly. The Doctor turned pale. Michael watched the scene from the other end of the room.

"I beg pardon, ma'am, for intruding," said the

thin young man, going up to the Doctor as he spoke.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The young man took out a paper, and handed it to the Doctor, who was already recovering his usual color.

"What on earth's this?" asked he, as he turned the paper over and over with an amused look on his face, which restored a little of Miss Farebrother's equanimity.

"At the suit of Richards and Turner, seven hundred and thirty-two pounds," replied the man promptly.

"But I don't owe Richards and Turner seven hundred and thirty-two pounds—never owed anybody so much in my life!" said the Doctor, opening the document and examining it with a frown of assumed bewilderment. "And—why, look here, my man, you've made a mistake. This paper is for a Mr. Donald James Macdonald. My name's Skates."

"It was Macdonald when I knew you last, sir," said the man with quiet doggedness. "That's all I have to do, sir. Good evening. With my apologies for intruding, madam."

The man retreated at once from the room, leaving consternation in the breast of Miss Farebrother, who turned to the Doctor with exclamations and eager, querulous questionings. He appeared to be lost in amazement.

"What does this mean, Doctor? Isn't your name Skates? Why—why—why have you allowed this, Michael?"

And she turned angrily to her nephew.

"Of course my name is Skates," replied the Doctor, as, struck apparently by a new idea, he walked quickly to the door in his turn. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Farebrother, I'll go and speak to this man. It's a trick—a trick which Mr. Farebrother has thought proper to play upon me, I'm sure."

And as he passed Michael he looked at him with such fury in his usually mild-looking eyes that the nature within was once more revealed to the younger man.

The moment the Doctor had left the room, Miss Farebrother turned angrily to her nephew. She was almost hysterical, and not in a condition for argument.

"How dare you do this? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! To play such a trick upon a guest of mine! And before me, too! I'm surprised, or rather I should be surprised if you weren't always doing something to annoy and distress me!"

Michael went up to her, and tried to soothe her. He was very gentle, very apologetic.

"I'm sorry to have had to do it before you, Aunt," he said. "But it had to be done, and you had to be convinced that Dr. Skates is not the estimable person he wishes you to think him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he has been known under another name before, and that under that name he ran up bills, and then, disappearing without paying them, he now turns up under an alias."

"Oh, but I don't believe it. It can't be true! It's part of the plot you have made, you and your brother, to separate me from any friends but those of your own choosing!" cried Miss Farebrother, with excitement. "The Doctor has told me that he met you in London to-day going into Mr. Buckle's office. Pray what were you doing there, if you were not trying to poison his mind against Dr. Skates?"

Michael was for a moment silent.

"I might as well ask," he said presently, "what Dr. Skates was doing there if he was not poisoning Mr. Buckle's mind against me."

"I think, considering what you professed to think of Mr. Buckle's opinion, it ill becomes you to maintain the same tone against the doctor now that you did before. You can't deny, I'm sure, that Mr. Buckle formed a very different opinion of Dr. Skates from your own."

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"It doesn't much matter, aunt, what opinion I have formed upon that or any other subject," he said quietly. "Since you prefer these strangers to your own relations, you have a perfect right to wish them to stay with you instead of us."

"Did I ever make any objection to your staying here?" asked Miss Farebrother irritably.

But to this Michael replied with some fire:

"If you think we're content to stay anywhere on sufferance, simply because no active objection has been taken to our remaining, you understand us much less than you used to do, Aunt."

"You're quite right. I don't understand you

at all. I can't think why you don't choose to live here at peace with my friends, instead of disturbing my household and making yourselves objectionable to my guests in the way you have thought proper to do."

"Well, we shan't make ourselves objectionable to anybody here much longer. We're going away, going to live in London, both of us," said Michael rather dryly.

"Indeed," said Miss Farebrother, trying to speak easily, but betraying some slight concern by the look in her eyes. "I hope you've considered well what the consequences of such a step may be to you."

"We've considered a good deal more carefully what the consequences may be to you, Aunt," said her nephew boldly. "However, there's no help for it; you have resolved to shut your ears to anything that you may be told which could reflect upon these people, even when you see the proof before your eyes, as you did just now."

Miss Farebrother grew a little pale, and began to look doubtful. She was on the point of putting an anxious question to her nephew as to the stranger who had intruded upon them, when the Doctor came back into the room, laughing heartily.

As soon as he was able to control himself sufficiently to speak, he went straight up to Michael and held out his hand to him. Furious, perplexed, the young man chose not to see this gesture, but hastily turned away, leaving the Doctor in the middle of the room, near his hostess. Dr.

Skates turned to her at once, with a shrug of the shoulders and a comical but good-humored expression.

"He won't forgive me! Mr. Farebrother won't forgive me for my accusation!" he exclaimed in assumed melancholy. "But I really think he might. I did indeed think this was a trick he had played upon me!"

"And wasn't it a trick, Doctor?" asked Miss Farebrother querulously.

"Not a bit of it," replied the doctor in his cheeriest tones. "The man really did honestly believe me to be the man he wanted, a certain Professor or tutor or something, named Macdonald, who owed some hundreds of pounds to a firm to whom he gave the slip a few years ago."

"But what made him take you for another man?" persisted Miss Farebrother quickly.

"Personal resemblance, I believe," said Dr. Skates, growing graver as he saw that the lady was not disposed to look upon the adventure as lightly as he did. "He showed me a photograph of the man, and it was certainly true that there was some superficial likeness between him and me."

"I should like to see the portrait. Do let us see the picture, Doctor," said Miss Farebrother.

"But the man's gone away," said the doctor, in apparent dismay.

Michael started, and went quickly across the room to the door. As he did so he caught a glance of the doctor's eye, which suddenly convinced him, by the expression of triumph in it, that his pursuit would be in vain. He would not

be balked, however, without an effort. So, leaving the house at once, he made for the station, where, after waiting about for an hour in the expectation of meeting the stranger who had served the writ, he discovered, by an accidental question to a porter, that the person of whom he was in search had taken a fly before Michael's arrival at the station, and driven to the next town about two miles away, from which place he could catch a train to London by another line.

Michael raged inwardly, feeling certain that this was a ruse by which Dr. Skates had got rid of an unwelcome visitor. There was nothing for it but to return, defeated and suspicious, to the Abbey, where he arrived in the middle of dinner. He slipped into his place with a hasty apology to his aunt, and noticed without surprise that, although, in the presence of the servants, no reference was made to the event of the afternoon, every face showed traces of the unusual emotions which had been stirred.

Miss Farebrother was cross and cold; the Doctor was genial, and almost mockingly jubilant; Mrs. Skates was somewhat silent, and cast anxious glances at Michael when she thought he was not looking; while poor Gaspard, who had been out all day, for the most part in the vicinity of the Vicarage, was puzzled and worried by the disturbance in the home atmosphere, of which he could not fail to be conscious. The brothers seized the first opportunity of exchanging confidences. When Gaspard heard of the meeting outside Mr. Buckle's office, he shook his head, and said:

"That man's too clever for us, Michael!"

His brother laughed.

"Wait till you hear a little more," said he, "and you'll think him cleverer still."

And he told the whole story of the accidental meeting with the writ-server, and of the incidents which followed. Then Gaspard threw back his head with a hollow laugh.

"It's more than clever—it's diabolical," said he, bitterly. "How can you suppose, for a moment, that we can protect either ourselves or our aunt from such a demon as the fellow is?"

"Wait a moment," said Michael, who, screwed up in his own particular armchair, with one leg hanging over the arm nearest the fire, looked something like an imp of mischief himself. "He's got the best of the game so far, I admit. But one never knows when the luck may change. At any rate, we've learned something to-day, that he has passed at some time or other by the name of Macdonald."

"Do you feel so sure even of that?"

"Course I do. Then, for another thing, we've found out that there's a third conspirator—the doctor's niece, who, by the description, must be the tall, dark young lady you took for a ghost."

Gaspard moved uneasily.

"I didn't take anybody for a ghost," he said, petulantly. "I—I said——"

"You said you saw a tall, beautiful, shadowy young woman, with long, black hair, standing in the air beside my aunt's bedside," interrupted Michael deliberately. "You seemed inclined to

to take her for a spirit; I incline to take her for a flesh and blood accomplice of the Doctor and Mrs. Skates. Now, we must have a name for her, as we are sure to have some further acquaintance with the lady. Shall we call her 'Laura,' favoring your supposition that she is the spirit that haunts this home? Or shall we call her Miss Macdonald according to my theory that she is the Doctor's niece?"

"Oh, call her what you like," grumbled Gaspard impatiently. "But I tell you it's impossible that these people can keep a person concealed about the house without anybody's knowing anything about it, and equally impossible that they can keep one near at hand, and introduce her into the building at any hour of the day or night they find convenient. Such things might be done in a town, but not in a country place like this."

Michael puffed at his cigarette.

"Not by anybody but our Satanic friend, but he's not a personage to let the impossibility of a thing stand in his way."

"Then what's the good of trying to fight him?"

"Come, Gaspard, you've no spirit. It's the keenness of the struggle that makes the fun of it. I'm not going to be beaten without a contest. In the first place, then—" He paused, and signified to his brother by a wave of the hand that he was to open the door suddenly, and find out if anybody was listening outside.

This Gaspard did, but with no result. Possibly the doctor felt too secure to trouble his head any longer about keeping himself informed of

the confidences of the young men. Gaspard came back rather sulkily.

"We're only making fools of ourselves by staying here," said he. "We can't even protect our aunt if, as you say, they manage to introduce themselves into her room at night. They may frighten her to death any day, without our being able to prevent it."

"I'm going to stay till Monday, at any rate," said Michael doggedly.

"Oh, your shepherdess!" scoffed Gaspard.

"Well, she's one reason. But another is that I want to know what means our dear friend Skates will employ to get hold of the money he wants to satisfy the people who are suing him."

"I don't believe in this Macdonald story. He seems too easy, too confident."

"But he took care not to let me meet the man again," said Michael. "So I haven't the least doubt that he told him he'd settle up in a day or two, and—that he means to do it."

"He'll borrow it from aunt," suggested Gaspard.

"No, he can't, for she would suspect him at once. She was a good deal surprised and disturbed, and if he were to ask for the loan of a large sum like that, she'd put two and two together, and he'd be discredited directly."

"He'll get it for his charities then!"

"That plan would be open to the same objection. Now, it was after 'Laura's' nocturnal visit that aunt became unmanageable before. Laura must be kept away from her for a night or two."

"How will you manage that?" asked his brother.

"There are two or three unoccupied rooms near my aunt's. I shall plant myself in one of them, and watch," said Michael, in a low voice.

"And all you'll catch for your pains will be a violent cold in the head," said Gaspard, scoffingly, as he got up to go to his own room.

"Perhaps," said Michael, drily.

CHAPTER XII

Miss Farebrother's three rooms were at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, and on the opposite side of the corridor were three other rooms, one of which was used by her maid as a workroom, while the others were usually kept shut up.

The two rooms occupied respectively by Dr. and Mrs. Skates opened upon a corridor which was a continuation of that into which Miss Farebrother's own rooms opened. It was higher, however, by a couple of steps, and between these two portions of the house was the opening to the principal staircase, up and down.

In the old days Miss Farebrother's two nephews had occupied the rooms now given up to the doctor and his wife. Both the young men had been rather surprised to find themselves now relegated to the upper floor; but it began to dawn upon Michael that the influence of Mrs. Skates had

been at work, and that she might have had strong reasons for choosing that, during the night at least, he and his brother should be well out of the way.

Michael waited that night until the house was quite quiet, and then he came downstairs without his slippers, and stole as noiselessly as possible to the workroom door, which was nearly opposite his aunt's bedroom. He had found out that Jarman, though she still slept in Miss Farebrother's dressing-room, now had to keep the door shut, so that she could no longer be a witness to any "visions" by her mistress' bedside.

The workroom door was not locked, and he was able to enter and seat himself near the door, which he kept ajar, without fear of having been heard. Fortunately, the room had been used during the evening, and the fire had not been out long, so that he could keep his vigil without risk of getting benumbed by the cold.

It seemed a long time, however, before the creaking of a distant board warned him to be on the alert. Rising at once, and gently pushing open the door, he ventured to look out. It was quite dark, and he saw nothing; but he presently heard another creaking sound, slight indeed, but nearer than the first noise had been. He held his breath. There was a long silence, and then he caught the sound of the handle of a door being softly turned.

In an instant he was out in the corridor, making a blind dash for the door of his aunt's room. He had made a shrewd guess, and his action was

so swift that he left no time for escape or for caution. He found that he had hurled himself, not against a ghost, but against a solid human being, and the cry, subdued, but full of alarm, which that being uttered, betrayed her for a woman.

Michael never uttered a sound. Putting one arm round his prize, he began to draw her in the direction of the workroom, and although she struggled and fought with great vigor, his superior muscle prevailed, and inch by inch he got her nearer to the door.

All this time he had been trying to find out something by which to identify his prisoner, in case she should manage to give him the slip before he was able to get a light. But in the circumstances this was a very difficult matter. His first suspicion when he knew that it was a woman he had caught, he had had to dismiss by this time. Instead of the wide waist and broad shoulders of Mrs. Skates, he had his arm round a slender and girlish form, while he had also discovered, under some filmy, soft material which seemed to be swathed round the figure, strands of long hair. He was certain now that he had caught the woman whom Gaspard had described by the bedside of his aunt; but the difficulty now was to identify her. Reviewing rapidly, as he held her, his chances of finding her out, he decided that if he could get her into the workroom, he would make no attempt to get a light, but would make for the bell by the fireplace, and try to rouse the household by that means.

His task, however, was by no means a light one, and it would have been easy to tell, by the intensity of the woman's struggles, that something more than a childish trick was involved in the threatened discovery.

In the last resort Michael had made up his mind that he would shout; but standing as they were just outside his aunt's room, he was afraid of the effect upon Miss Farebrother of any sudden disturbance. It was known that her heart was weak, and a discovery of this kind made in sensational circumstances in the middle of the night was a danger for her not to be lightly risked.

Michael had got his prisoner to the very door of the workroom, when he heard a tiny crash of glass, and there flashed through his mind the notion that the woman might be carrying upon her person a little electric lamp. Desisting for a moment, therefore, in his attempt to drag her into the room, he felt for the battery, which, in that case, she must be carrying about her person.

The moment he began to do this, the woman seized his hand, and began in an agitated whisper, in which he in vain tried to recognize any voice he had ever heard, to appeal to his feelings.

"What are you going to do to me? Why won't you let me go?" implored the voice.

Michael answered in a voice as low as her own, but without relaxing his hold.

"I'll let you go at once if you'll tell me who you are," said he, "and what you were doing at the door of Miss Farebrother's room."

There was a pause.

"I daren't tell you," was the whisper back. "I daren't, I daren't!"

For answer to this, Michael, with a sudden movement, pushed open the door of the workroom, and at the same moment got the woman inside.

Whether it was an accidental result of the unexpectedness of his action, or whether it was a stratagem on the part of his prisoner, Michael could not be sure; but the next moment he found that she had fallen to the ground. Then she uttered a sharp cry of pain.

Of course, Michael was shocked; of course he relaxed his hold. Equally, of course, the feminine prisoner took instant advantage of this, and was up and away in a moment, slamming the door to behind her.

The enraged Michael made a dash at the escaping figure, but it was a dash in the dark, and all he got for his pains was a morsel of some soft material that tore in his hands, before the door was closed between him and his lost prize.

Of course, the consequences were terrible. Miss Farebrother was roused from her sleep by the slamming door, and sent Jarman out to know the meaning of the noise. Dr. Skates came out presently in his dressing-gown, candle in hand, to ask solicitously if Miss Farebrother had been taken ill. Mrs. Skates appeared at her door, full of feminine questions, of nervous fears; and poor Michael, who had thought it best not to attempt to escape, found himself the target for everybody's displeasure.

He had hastily secreted the poor trophy of his conflict with the unseen woman, and the explanation he gave was that he had been aroused by a noise, and had come down, thinking there were burglars in the house. It was while in pursuit of some one whom he supposed to be a burglar, he said, that the door of the workroom had been slammed, not by him.

By this time some of the servants had appeared on the scene, and a tour of the house was made, under the direction of Dr. Skates, who affected to be seriously alarmed, and to take Michael's view that some one had got in.

Michael raged inwardly, and conducted a search on his own account, knowing well how careful the Doctor would be to lead the rest off the scent instead of on it. But his efforts were unsuccessful, as, indeed, he had felt they were bound to be, since he was working alone, and the Doctor was not.

Disheartened and dispirited, but not despairing, he went back to his own room, and did not take Gaspard into his confidence until the following morning, when he went early into his brother's room and spread out upon the bed about half a yard of some bedraggled and flimsy stuff at which Gaspard looked with helpless bewilderment.

"What's that rag?" he asked at last, as Michael did not attempt to modify his sphinxlike look and attitude.

"Part of your ghost!" said Michael shortly.

"What?"

"It's part, I say, of the paraphernalia of the woman you saw in my aunt's room masquerading as a spirit," Michael explained deliberately. "And if you don't believe me, look at this!"

And he showed his brother some half-dozen very long black hairs, which had been left in his hands, together with part of her torn drapery, when his prisoner of the night made her successful struggle to get away.

Gaspard turned white. All the trickery, all the knavery, evidences of which were accumulating round them, had upon him quite a different effect from that which they had upon his more energetic and less sensitive brother. They sickened, shocked him unspeakably. Michael, on the other hand, was only nerved to fresh exertions by each discovery. He hated to be beaten, and he felt a very natural and right disinclination to leave the artful and unscrupulous Dr. Skates and his wife in possession of the field.

"Let's go away to-day," said Gaspard, hoarsely, after a moment's silence.

"Not me," retorted Michael between his set teeth. "Not till I've found out just how our friend means to make up the sum he has to pay to get out of his scrape. It's evident the 'ghost' was meant to advise Aunt last night to pay out the money either to the Doctor or to some confederate of his."

"What! How can you tell——"

"I can't tell, of course, for certain. But I can make a good guess," said Michael. "It was after the last visit of the 'spirit' that Aunt sud-

denly changed her mind about sending for old Buckle."

"It wouldn't have made much difference if she had sent for him," put in Gaspard, despondently.

Michael went on without heeding.

"And I'm convinced the visit of last night was intended to help Skates out of this fresh difficulty. If only I could have seen her face, or heard her natural voice!" moaned he. "But the minx was too artful for me."

"I suppose," suggested Gaspard, "it's one of the servants, whom they've bought over?"

Michael shook his head doubtfully.

"I thought of that," said he; "but I don't think there's anything in it. The woman I caught was tall and very slight. Now there isn't a woman in the house who's tall and slight too, except poor old Jarman, who tumbled out of my aunt's room in her old drab dressing-gown, with her little wisp of hair sticking up straight on her head, and her eyes like saucers with fright!"

"Why didn't you follow the woman?"

"How could I? When the door was shut in my face she had time enough to get a start. When I got into the corridor she had disappeared, probably into Mrs. Skates's room, since both the Doctor and his wife must certainly have been on the watch. I wonder whether this bit of stuff and these long dark hairs will help us to hunt her to earth." Michael examined the material carefully. "Of course she wrapped this all round her, and I believe she had an electric light somewhere about her, which would be just veiled enough to

give the dim shadowy effect you described. I wonder what women call this, whether it's chiffon, or tulle, or tarlatan, or muslin, or what."

But here, of course, Gaspard was unable to help him. They fingered the stuff together, with very long faces bent over their work, but got no further in their investigation. Then Michael locked up the precious fragment and the long hair and hid them carefully away, and set himself to the day's business of watching the Doctor.

He did this to some purpose.

During the whole of the forenoon he kept the worthy Doctor in sight, affecting to listen with interest to his account of the burglar-hunt of the night, and entirely conscious all the time that both the Doctor and his wife had heard every detail of his struggle with the mysterious ghost.

Mrs. Skates, who was less brilliant as an actress than her husband was as an actor, did not so well disguise the anxiety she felt; and while Michael watched the Doctor it was evident that the lady was watching Michael.

Miss Farebrother, who was very cold to both her nephews, and rather cross to everybody, was persuaded to take a little walk in the garden, when luncheon was over, with the Doctor and his wife. True to his intention of keeping Dr. Skates under his eye, Michael watched the three from behind the muslin blind of one of the upper rooms.

And presently he saw the Doctor drop behind the ladies, and disappear in the direction of the garden door into the house. Like an arrow from a bow Michael flew down-stairs to look for him.

Standing in the passage which led from the hall to the west end of the house, Michael thought he heard a slight sound in the drawing-room. The door opened noiselessly, so he went in and looked round the screen. And there was the Doctor, standing close to Miss Farebrother's writing-table, the flowers on which were shaking slightly.

Quiet as Michael's movements had been, the Doctor turned quickly, and discovered his presence. He appeared, however, to be quite undisturbed.

"Ah, Farebrother!" cried he. "The house is the best place this afternoon, I think. I hope those ladies won't stay out there long enough to catch cold. I think I must bring them in. Or will you go?"

"I think, Doctor, you have more influence than I," said Michael, as he seated himself beside the fire.

"All right. I'll go then," said the Doctor genially, as he walked to the door and left the young man by himself.

And Michael never left the room again until the ladies came back.

The afternoon passed without incident, Michael still keeping his place in the corner, until five o'clock, when the Doctor and his wife were obliged to go away, rather reluctantly, as it seemed to Michael, to pay a promised call on the Vicar's wife.

As soon as they were gone the young man addressed his aunt, who had given him several hints that she found his presence oppressive.

"May I ask, Aunt," he said, with a certain

gravity of manner which impressed her against her will, "if you will look over the contents of your writing-table, and see if everything about it is exactly as you left it when you used it last?"

The color came into the old lady's cheeks.

"That's a very strange thing to ask," she said, suspiciously. "Why do you want me to do this?"

"Because I found some one standing by it this afternoon in a manner that gave me a strong feeling that the table had been ransacked."

Miss Farebrother shrugged her shoulders angrily.

"Really," she said, "I have no patience with your behavior, Michael. You make all sorts of disturbances by night; you offend my friend and worry me; and you would, if you could, make my life unbearable by setting me to suspect the motives of every one around me. Of course, I know to whom your words point, and I shall not insult the character of any of my friends by doing what you ask."

Michael said no more; and when a lady called to see Miss Farebrother he took the opportunity of leaving the room.

That his words had not been quite without effect, however, he discovered later, when, on going up to bid his aunt good-night, she whispered to him, with triumph in her voice, drawing him aside when the rest had left the room:

"I did look at everything on and in my writing-table, just to prove how ill-natured you are.

Nothing had been touched since I left it. I hope you are ashamed of having made me do such a thing."

Michael bowed, without answering. It was satisfactory, he thought, that he had even been able to get her to look.

On the following day, which was Saturday, Dr. Skates went up to town by the first train, having received, so Mrs. Skates explained at breakfast, a letter which might necessitate his going back to America before long.

Gaspard was inclined to rejoice over this news; but Michael doubted it.

"I am inclined to think," he said, "that it's a red herring drawn across the scent. The Doctor has business in London, and it seems as well to take off our attention by raising hopes that he may go away altogether."

It was nearly luncheon time before Miss Farebrother came down-stairs, and it was not until after that meal that she entered the drawing-room for the first time that day, accompanied by Mrs. Skates and both her nephews. She had just received a note which she wanted to answer herself, and she got Gaspard to move her writing-table for her, and, sitting down, began to write.

It had been a habit of hers during the last few days to ignore her former favorite, Michael, as much as possible, and now that the Doctor was away she got Gaspard to do her the little service for which she would have accepted Dr. Skates's help had he been present.

"What subscription did I send last time to this

'Guild'?" asked she, handing the printed list she had received to her elder nephew.

Gaspard looked for her name and answered:

"Two guineas, Aunt."

"Thank you," said Miss Farebrother. And, opening one of the drawers of her table, she took out her cheque-book.

The next moment she uttered an exclamation, and Michael's sharp eyes detected the reason. There was no need for her to cry:

"A cheque has been taken out!"

Then she looked up, met the eyes of her younger nephew, and began to tremble violently. Mrs. Skates, sitting by the fire, appeared to be deeply interested in something she was reading in a newspaper; Gaspard hardly understood the situation. It was Michael and Miss Farebrother who read each the thoughts of the other. The old lady put her cheque-book away with a trembling hand, and saying faintly: "I'll—I'll write it out presently," turned abruptly away from the table.

Michael did not attempt to press his advantage. He felt sure that the missing cheque had been torn out by Dr. Skates on the previous day, when he had found that worthy alone in the drawing-room, close by the writing table. And he felt equally sure that there would appear in his aunt's bank-book, the next time she examined it, a large sum which she would not be able to account for. Comment at this stage was, therefore, unnecessary.

Mrs. Skates, as if she had seen nothing of all

this, now began her usual attentions to her hostess; and the two young men presently left the ladies together.

Gaspard, when Michael had explained things to him, was inclined to look upon the exposure of Dr. Skates as a foregone conclusion. But Michael was less hopeful.

"He's been even with us so many times," said he warningly, "that I don't feel at all sure he may not be even with us again."

It was late when the Doctor returned from town that day. Mrs. Skates met him at the station, and the two young men wondered with what countenance he would meet Miss Farebrother, when his wife had informed him of her discovery of the missing cheque.

They were soon satisfied. The Doctor was in the highest spirits, and if Miss Farebrother had the least suspicion of his good faith, she concealed the fact remarkably well. Soon after his return to the Abbey, however, she had a long conversation with him alone, and after that she retired to her own room, without seeing anybody else that night.

Gaspard and Michael wondered what that conversation was about; whether their aunt had asked the Doctor any awkward questions, and, if so, how he had met them.

They had no means of finding out her disposition on the following day, which was Sunday; for Miss Farebrother made the excuse of indisposition to remain all day in her own room, where she received no one but Mrs. Skates; and even that

lady was not allowed to remain with her long, nor to return to the rest of the household with a very happy demeanor.

Gaspard and Michael guessed that she had found her hostess "trying," and more and more they wondered what the doctor and Miss Farebrother had said to each other the night before.

The day passed heavily with them all, and Gaspard continually urged upon his brother that this must be their last day at the Abbey. Michael put him off; he was growing restless and excited over the thought of meeting the "little shepherdess."

Miss Bell arrived early on Monday morning, before Miss Farebrother was up. She was shown into the morning-room, and Michael hastened into the room to bid her welcome. As he opened the door, however, he started with a sudden chill. Dr. Skates was sitting close beside the young girl, talking to her with fatherly kindness, and with an evident interest, which made Michael's blood boil and his eyes flash.

It was some seconds before he could trust himself to speak.

CHAPTER XIII

The Dresden china shepherdess looked prettier than ever, Michael thought, as she looked up at his entrance, her fair skin slightly flushed, and her dark eyes bright with excitement.

It was evident to the younger man that the Doctor had been paying her some compliment, which had set her blushing. Michael had to introduce himself, and he was rather hurt to find that the pretty girl had forgotten him altogether. It was true that the glasses he now chose to wear had been in his pocket during the celebrated interview in the shop, and that on that occasion he had been wearing a hat, with a soft wide brim, which cast some shade over his face. Still, it seemed to him that her want of recollection showed some ingratitude on her part; and the fact that he had warned Miss Burns to say nothing about his share in getting her this engagement did not prevent the unreasonable young man from feeling sore at heart.

Doctor Skates, therefore, had the best of it, and contrived to monopolize the lady's conversation until Jarman appeared and carried Miss Bell off up-stairs.

A room had been prepared for her in Miss Farebrother's own quarter, on the opposite side of the corridor, and Jarman showed her into it, that she might take off her hat and jacket, telling her that she would return in a few moments to lead her to the old lady's room.

Miss Farebrother was in her boudoir, huddled up in a long, loose gown of pale blue silk, in which she looked like the witch of a fairy tale. She was quite kind, but there was in her manner a certain shade of irritability which puzzled and troubled the young girl.

"I hope you like your room, my dear," she

said, as she rubbed her little thin hands together before the fire.

"It's beautiful, thank you. I'm delighted with it."

"That's right. That's right. If there's anything you would like—a screen, or an extra table—tell me, and I'll see to it at once. I want you to be quite comfortable and happy here. By the by—" The old lady looked at her quickly, and her expression altered for the worse: "Have you seen anybody since you arrived?"

The girl flushed a little, surprised, not only by the question, but by the sharpness with which it was put.

"I've seen two gentlemen," said she. "A Dr. Skates, and another who said he was your nephew, I think."

The old lady frowned.

"Oh, of course. With spectacles, and his hair plastered down?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Miss Farebrother, tartly, "I particularly wish you to have as little to say to my nephew Michael as possible. He and the Doctor are at daggers drawn." The girl looked up with a flash of intelligence. "At least, perhaps that's hardly fair to the Doctor. But my nephew has taken a dislike to him, and spares no pains to hide the fact, and to make things as uncomfortable for him and for me as possible. The life we live here is wretched in consequence. He is my brother's child, and I can't send him away; but I particularly wish you, as long as these discordant

elements remain in my household, not to take sides with either the one or the other. Now will you find it hard, do you think, to follow my wishes in this respect?"

"Oh, no," said the girl, readily. "Indeed, I should prefer to feel that I'm here for you only, and I don't think I shall find the least difficulty in doing as you wish."

"There's a dear, good girl," said the old lady, patting her hand gently, while a look of evident relief came over her face. "You will be able to do a great deal for my happiness if you can keep your word. I have been a very miserable old woman lately, feeling that my efforts to treat everybody well have failed, that my motives have been misunderstood, and that every one who came near me had some interested feeling, and was fighting with me against some one else."

"You shall never have that feeling with me, if I can help it," said the girl gently. "You don't know how grateful I feel for your kindness, or how beautiful it is to be in a nice house like this again," she added with a smile.

The old lady shook her head.

"It's too early to talk about gratitude," she said gravely. "We must find out first whether you are likely to be happy with me."

Pretty Valetta Bell soon found that her promise to Miss Farebrother was more difficult to keep than she had expected. After spending the rest of the morning with the old lady, and having luncheon with her up-stairs, she was told, when Mrs. Skates came up, that she might have the

afternoon to herself. The Doctor's wife's manner to her, though outwardly as sweet as usual, had an unmistakable sub-acidity which was noticed both by Valetta herself and by Miss Farebrother, who broke out impatiently:

"Blanche, I'll have no jealousy between you and Miss Bell. I've had quite enough to put up with from the other members of the household! I expect my own sex to stand by me."

"So we will," cried little Miss Bell with spontaneous brightness and decision.

"By all means, dearest," cooed Mrs. Skates; but she managed to dart one last vinegary glance at Valetta as the girl left the room.

The little companion went first to her own room, already beginning to feel that there would be difficulties in the way of living at peace with all men, and particularly with all women. She managed very neatly to "dodge" the Doctor when she presently went down-stairs; but it was only to fall into the clutches of Michael, who, if the truth must be known, had been lying in wait for her all day. She did not know her way about very well yet, and as she was hesitating which way to turn Michael came suddenly upon her, and asked her whether he should show her over the house.

"Oh, I won't trouble you to do that, thank you," said poor Valetta, remembering Miss Farebrother's injunction, and speaking with a distant tone Michael had not heard in her voice before. "If you will kindly tell me where I can get a book."

"Well, a book—of a sort—you can get in the library," said he, leading the way down one of those bewildering passages with which the big house was full.

She felt bound to follow, debating within herself how she could get rid of him civilly, for fear Miss Farebrother should hear of her being with the unfortunate nephew who was in disgrace. She felt sorry all the time that she must be prim and harsh, for his tone and manner were kind, and much more to her taste than the more effusive civility of the Doctor.

Michael threw open the door of the library—a bare-looking apartment of state, with rows upon rows of well-bound books, in tall handsome cases, looking for all the world as if they had been glued in their places, and were not meant to be touched. There was a little fire burning in a big grate, and near it was the one shabby armchair the room contained, and a revolving bookcase, on the top of which was a pile of newspapers and periodicals.

All the rest of the furniture was clean and smart and new-looking, and apparently as firmly glued in place as the books on the shelves.

"There, you can find plenty of books here," said Michael, as he went up to the nearest bookcase, opened it, and took down an armful of severe-looking biographies. "What would you like? Something improving, I hope?"

The prim tone and manner which he had used that morning when in the presence of the Doctor he had now dropped although he still wore the

disfiguring spectacles, and looked an odd figure in his long black coat.

Miss Bell laughed a little, though she, on her side was trying hard to be very stiff and prim.

"I think I should like a novel best," she said, rather shyly.

"Well, you shall sit down by the fire, and I'll bring you some to choose from."

"Oh, but——"

She stopped, in evident distress. This was exactly what Miss Farebrother would not like her to do, and Valetta, who guessed that Mrs. Skates would be spying upon her movements, began to grow very red, and to look towards the door.

"Have you got to read to my aunt?" asked Michael, rather surprised.

"No. She was kind enough to say I might do just as I liked this afternoon——"

"Then do like to see what I can find for you. You shan't sit in that chair." And with a vigorous push he sent the comfortable shabby armchair flying across the room. "It's the one that's always used by that old beast, Skates."

Instantly Valetta drew herself up, and made an instinctive step towards the door. Michael was up in arms. With a quick movement he tore off his spectacles, and, holding them tightly in one hand, which he used to gesticulate violently as he spoke he asked abruptly:

"Have you let yourself be talked over by that slimy old rascal?" Have you——"

"Mr. Farebrother," cried the girl, making a movement as if she would have put her hands to

her ears, "I really can't allow you to speak in that manner of a person who——"

She hesitated. She was rather frightened, but was still trying hard to be prim.

"Who what?" asked Michael, shortly.

"Well, who is a friend of Miss Farebrother's, and who, besides, got me this engagement."

It was Michael's turn to draw himself primly up.

"Oh, he told you that, did he?"

"Yes. He——. Really, Mr. Farebrother, if you want me to speak, you must listen quietly."

"How did he tell you he got you the engagement?" asked Michael, who could scarcely control himself, so angry was he with the artful Doctor. "Did you know him before?"

"I've often seen him at Cliffgate," answered Valetta, "but I've not known him to speak to. He says he found out that I might perhaps like an engagement of this kind, and that he suggested my name to Miss Burns."

Michael had to walk up and down the room before he could trust himself to speak. At last, planting himself deliberately before her, with his eyes aflame, he said, in a voice he could scarcely keep steady: "Will you find out from Miss Burns yourself who it was that asked her to go to you?"

Valetta began to look and to feel uncomfortable. Here was she already embroiling herself with the two persons in the household she was anxious to avoid.

"Oh, pray don't speak of it," said she, quickly.

"After all, what does it matter who it was? It makes no difference. Perhaps I misunderstood——"

"If you really want to know who it was suggested your name to Miss Burns——"

"But I don t," cried Valetta, quickly.

There was a pause. Michael felt snubbed. He turned to the bookshelves, and began to fumble about among the volumes with shaking fingers. The girl stole towards the door. Before she could reach it, Michael stood between her and the handle, very gentle, very much subdued.

"Please don't go till I have found you a book," said he, pleadingly. "Or I shall think I've offended you. I haven't, have I?"

He was so earnest, yet so discreet in his entreaty, that Valetta in vain tried to steel herself to a refusal. After stammering awkwardly for a moment, she said softly: "Well——"

The one word was enough. With a gentle laugh, he led her back to the fireplace, brought forward one of the stiff-looking red morocco armchairs, and made her a sign to be seated. With an uneasy feeling which showed itself in her pretty face, Valetta sat down, and Michael then brought about a dozen volumes and, going down on one knee, in such a fashion that he barricaded her in on the hearthrug, he proceeded to offer them to her one by one.

Nervously anxious as she was to get through this ordeal, the young girl was touched by something undefined in Michael's manner, which appealed to her heart. The poor boy was in dis-

grace, and whether the fault were his or not, she felt that her sympathy went out to him rather than to the over-genial, oily Doctor with whom he was at war.

"You're fond of books, aren't you?" he asked at last, rather nervously, with a quick, shy look up in her face.

Something like a flash of half-forgotten memory made Valetta look at him askance before she said: "Why do you ask that? How did you know?"

"Well, it was among books that I first saw you," said he, in a low voice.

She looked him straight in the face, with rising color.

"When? Where was it?" she then asked, abruptly. "I've had a sort of fancy I'd seen you before somewhere, or heard your voice. But I can't remember where."

"It was in a bookshop. I made a stupid mistake——" began Michael, reddening a little in his turn.

Then she remembered, and in spite of herself she joined with him in the quiet laughter the remembrance evoked. But to this merriment there suddenly succeeded a look of pain and embarrassment which Michael could not fail to notice.

"I think," she said, rather abruptly, taking up the first volume which came to hand, and rising from her chair at the same moment, "I'll take this one."

"'Rienzi!' Why, you said you'd read it twice!"

"Did I? Oh, well then, I'll take any one you like," said Valetta, hastily.

She had so suddenly altered her manner, and become extremely shy and reserved, that it was impossible to doubt that there was some reason for her strangely inconsistent behavior. Michael stood for a moment uncertain what course to pursue, then he barred her way to the door, and asked, earnestly:

"Won't you tell me, Miss Bell, why you are so suddenly unkind? What have you been told about me?"

Valetta clasped her hands, and grew red and white alternately. Then, with one look up in the frank, open face of the young man before her, she decided to speak out and to tell him the truth.

"I will tell you," she said, in a low voice. "It will be best. I've learned that there are dissensions in the house most unfortunate dissensions——"

"Who told you so? Dr. Skates, I suppose?"

"No."

"Then it must have been my aunt. Will you tell me what she said?"

Valetta hesitated, and the tears came into her eyes. Michael's tone grew at once passionately anxious, as he said, quickly:

"Never mind. Don't tell me anything, if it causes you pain to speak. And I think I can guess what it was you heard: it was that I am an ungrateful, worthless scamp of a fellow——"

"No, no. Oh, no, she didn't say that!" broke in Valetta, quickly.

But he went on, without heeding her:

"Who has upset the peace of the whole household, and was always making himself disagreeable, and insulting my aunt's friends. Yes, that was it, I know." And he thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned away with a momentary assumption of devil-may-care recklessness. Then he heard a stifled sob, and, turning again towards the girl, he saw such a look of tender distress on her pretty face that all his assumed nonchalance gave way at once to a much softer feeling. "Never mind," said he, in a low voice, venturing to come a step nearer, and looking down earnestly into her face. "It's a most difficult position for you, I see. You want to keep out of all the little worries and quarrels——"

"Oh, it isn't that. It's not for myself, it's for Miss Farebrother," said Valetta, frankly. "She is most kind, most just. And these things make her unhappy; she is afraid everybody thinks she's neglecting her duty, when really she's doing what she can for the best all the time. And so I promised that I wouldn't take sides, that I would keep out of everything if I could, and think only of her. Do you see? What else could I do, whatever——" Her voice sank a little——"whatever I might think."

"I do see, and I understand. You are quite right, quite right. If you will only keep to that course, and not care for anybody but my aunt and her interests, it will be the best thing that has

happened to this most unlucky household for many a day."

"And you'll understand, won't you, that I don't mean to be unkind, if——if——"

She hesitated. Plain-speaking was getting just a little difficult.

"If you don't take much notice of me? Oh, yes. I shall understand. And I'm going to make your task in that respect very easy for you," said Michael, not intending to speak bitterly, and unaware of the feeling that peeped out in his tones: "I'm going away. Indeed, I only waited——"

Before he could finish his sentence, the soft-hearted girl had burst into tears. Michael was overwhelmed.

"Oh, don't, don't! You make me feel such a brute! I assure you I didn't mean that—that I'm going away because of your coming. On the contrary," went on poor Michael, getting indiscreetly frank under the influence of the girl's distress, "I shouldn't have stayed here till to-day if I hadn't been so anxious, so very anxious, to see you again."

In the midst of her tears, Valetta looked up in surprise.

"To see me?" she said.

It was on Michael's tongue to confess the truth that he had been longing eagerly for another sight of her, that she had made upon him an impression he could never forget; but, with the self-control which is sometimes so unexpectedly shown by strongly impulsive natures, of whom

one would least expect it, he put a check upon himself, and, after a moment's pause, said very gently and gravely :

"Yes. I just wanted to feel, before going away, that there was some one about my aunt whom I should feel sure of, somebody who would do what you will do, watch over her and do your best to keep her from harm."

Although she felt touched by this speech, there was something in it which caused a slight frown to cloud Valetta's pretty face. For was he not evidently doing his best to poison her mind, as Miss Farebrother had foreseen, against his antagonist, the Doctor?

So that it was with rather more coldness than before that she said : "You may be sure I will do my very best for her ; and so I should do even if she were not surrounded by friends whom she trusts."

It was a very neat reproof, and Michael smiled a little.

"You like the Doctor and his wife?" he asked.

Valetta hesitated, and reddened a little.

"That has nothing to do with it," she began, evasively.

"Oh, but I think it has—a great deal. If they inspired me with the confidence you evidently feel in them——"

"You are putting words into my mouth," protested Valetta.

Michael faced her squarely.

"Do they inspire you with confidence?" he said.

She bit her lip, and looked down.

"You have no right——" she began.

He took her up quickly.

"Of course I have not. I apologize. Well, you have been careful to let me understand that you don't trust me, and I admire your prudence. But I do beg you to be prudent enough not to trust the other side either."

Valetta was torn by her feelings, and uppermost at that moment came pity for the frank-faced young fellow before her, with his evident earnestness, his kindness, and something less definite, which attracted her at least as much, though she did not guess that it was passionate admiration for herself.

"Listen," she said, quickly: "I ought not to speak out, perhaps, but I don't like you to think I'm unfair. I don't know that I do trust—the other persons. Certainly I am no partisan of theirs. I want to keep my promise, and not to take sides. At the same time, since I have got to live in the same house with them, I want to be on good terms with everybody, not only for my own sake, but for Miss Farebrother's. And my difficulty is this, I tell you frankly: I want to like Dr. and Mrs. Skates, but I don't like them at present, at least not very much. And I don't want to like you, but I can't help it——at least, a little."

As she uttered these words quickly, with her eyes cast down, Michael made an instinctive step forward, delighted, carried away by her pretty

ingenuousness. But at once she drew back and put out her hand.

"I'm going," said she, "to fight against both feelings. I want to like you all at just the same cold level, and you must help me, please. Don't get me into trouble with Miss Farebrother by letting everybody know, at least, by making everybody think—that I'm not beautifully impartial, beautifully indifferent."

What could any man say to such an appeal as this? Michael felt that he could have knelt and kissed the hem of her garment. Instead, he murmured some incoherent and stupid commonplace, and let her go.

When Gaspard presently seized him, and asked if he was not going to London that night, the younger shook him off roughly, and replied emphatically that he was not. He was ready to go, yes, certainly, of course he was. But it was plainly their duty to make sure, before going, that the new element in the household would work harmoniously with the old.

Gaspard shrugged his shoulders with contempt.

"I quite understand," said he drily. "But I must just tell you this: Dresden shepherdess or no Dresden shepherdess, I go up to London tomorrow, whether you go with me or not."

CHAPTER XIV

Now there were two other points which Michael was anxious to have cleared up before he left the Abbey. One of these concerned the conversation which he knew Miss Farebrother to have had with Dr. Skates on the Saturday night, after the discovery that a cheque was missing from her cheque-book. That this talk had been a serious one he was convinced, and he fancied that her subsequent action, in shutting herself up in her own rooms, was a result of that interview. He was most anxious to know, therefore, what had passed between them and how the wily Doctor had succeeded in diverting suspicion from himself.

The second matter about which he was anxious was connected with the first. When would Miss Farebrother discover that an amount had been withdrawn from her banking account without her knowledge? What action would she take when she found it out?

He was soon satisfied on one at least of these points; for that very afternoon his aunt sent for him; and on going up to her boudoir, Michael found himself in the presence not only of her, but of one of the head clerks from the bank where she kept her principal account.

"Good morning, Michael," she said very coldly

to her nephew, as soon as he entered the room. "You know Mr. Young, from the bank, I believe?"

The two men bowed to each other, and Mr. Young, at a sign from the old lady, explained his errand.

"A cheque was presented at the bank on Saturday, just before closing time," said he, "made out to a John Manners, and apparently signed by Miss Farebrother."

"Now for it!" thought Michael, as he started and looked alert for a moment.

Mr. Young went on: "There was, at the moment, no suspicion that it was not all right; but later it seems to have occurred to the cashier to doubt its genuineness, and I have been sent down to ask Miss Farebrother if it was in order."

Michael looked at once at his aunt. To his surprise, the old lady had her eyes fixed upon him with piercing intentness, as if she resented the warning he had given her about the missing cheque.

"I have not given Mr. Young any answer at present," said Miss Farebrother icily. "I have sent for you because you made a statement to me on Saturday, a statement which you may remember."

"Perfectly," said Michael, more and more puzzled by his aunt's manner. "I told you——"

"Never mind at present what you told me," said his aunt, in the same tone. She was silent for a moment, and then she rose, and turning to the bank clerk said: "If you will excuse us a

moment, Mr. Young, I should like to put a question to my nephew."

And she led the way into her dressing-room. Bewildered by her manner, Michael paused for a moment to say to the clerk :

" How much was the cheque for, and who presented it ? "

" It was for six hundred pounds, and it was presented by a respectable-looking, middle-aged man, who might have been the secretary of some charitable society, such as those to which Miss Farebrother has been such a large contributor lately."

" Was it an open cheque ? " asked Michael.

" Yes, it was that fact, and the largeness of the sum, that drew particular attention to the cheque, and made it seem desirable to verify it."

" Thank you," said Michael, as he followed his aunt into the adjoining room.

Instead of the distress and confusion that he expected to see in her, the young man found his aunt in a perfectly calm and stolid mood, such as he never remembered to have seen her in before. She was sitting by her dressing-table, and as soon as he had shut the door, she said abruptly :

" Have you any further statement to make about this affair ? "

" Only this, Aunt, that I'm certain the cheque was taken on Friday by Dr. Skates, that he forged your signature to it, and that the business he had in town on Saturday was to employ some person in his power or in his confidence to present it at your bank, and to deliver the money to him," said Michael at once.

She listened in dead silence, and then her face suddenly broke into a peculiar dry smile.

"Ah!" said she, "I thought so. You have not the least compunction about bringing this deliberate accusation against another man, simply because you dislike him."

"Not because I dislike him, Aunt, but because I've proved him to be an artful and designing man, who is recklessly unscrupulous in his methods."

"What methods?"

"He has worked upon your feelings by means of tricks," said Michael, grown rash in his anger. "He has introduced a girl into your room at night, who has passed herself off upon you as a spirit——"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Miss Farebrother, rising from her chair and standing with one trembling hand resting upon her dressing-table.

"I mean that I caught the girl outside your room on Friday night, when you heard that disturbance, and that a piece of the green stuff she had wrapped round her was left in my hand when she got away. I have it locked up in my cabin-trunk up-stairs," added Michael firmly.

As he uttered these words, he had a fancy that he heard a sound in Miss Farebrother's bedroom and he made a dash across the dressing-room to the door, threw it open, and saw the placid Mrs. Skates, not indeed close to the door by which he stood, but not too far off to have heard his words.

His aunt's voice, grown very hard and cold, called him back. He saw that what he said had affected her, but she professed not to heed it.

"Nothing in the way of malice or ill-nature on your part would surprise me," she said.

"Did you know that Mrs. Skates was listening in the next room, Aunt?" asked Michael, interrupting her.

"She may have been in the next room, but she certainly would not have condescended to listen to conversation not intended for her ears," retorted Miss Farebrother. "Those methods are left for people who bring direct accusations to hide their own misdeeds."

"Aunt, what do you mean? Do you accuse me of——"

"I accuse nobody," said Miss Farebrother, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, as she walked towards the door of her boudoir, "until I have complete proof."

As she uttered the last word she re-entered the room where she had left the bank clerk.

"This signature is mine, Mr. Young," said she in a quiet, dry voice, as she handed him back the disputed cheque.

The young man stared, then bowed his head. Michael was speechless with amazement, rage, and disgust. It was but too evident that, instead of accepting his suggestions, or even heeding them, his aunt had chosen to turn her suspicions upon him. Now Michael understood what had happened on the interview of Saturday evening; Dr. Skates had evidently seized the opportunity of

awaking Miss Farebrother's suspicions, and of fixing them upon his enemy.

The look of malignant magnanimity which Miss Farebrother cast at her nephew as she acknowledged the forged signature as her own came with the force of a stunning blow upon him. He did not wait even for the departure of the bank clerk; but, with a little hollow laugh, left the room.

He saw how easy it had been for the artful Doctor to turn suspicion away from himself. Michael had indeed found Dr. Skates alone in the drawing-room on the eventful Friday; but the Doctor had gone out of the room first, leaving Michael there alone in his turn. What could be easier than for him to trump up a story of Michael's imaginary need of six hundred pounds, the very sum which he himself had withdrawn, by means of a forged cheque, on that very day?

Michael hastened with his story to his brother, who, instead of seeing in it another reason why they should stay on at the Abbey, and confound the Doctor, again urged on his brother the advisability of their going away at once.

He finally prevailed upon Michael to yield to his wishes, and the two packed their luggage immediately, and, having learned that Miss Farebrother was now in the drawing-room with the others, went in, hat in hand, to bid her good-by.

"Where are you going?" asked their aunt, coldly, as if scarcely noting that they wore their overcoats, and carried their rugs and bags.

"We think, Aunt," said Gaspard, gravely, though with a slightly tremulous voice, "that, as

our presence here has only been a source of trouble and annoyance to you and your friends, we had better leave you. We thank you very much for your kindness in letting us stay here, when it was evidently vexatious that we should come at all."

Now Michael noticed that these words affected both Dr. and Mrs. Skates very strongly; the lady turned quite pale, and even the Doctor began to move restlessly, as if under the influence of some strong excitement. As for Valetta, she had to put her handkerchief furtively up to her eyes to prevent the tears from falling.

"And as for me, Aunt, as you almost called me a thief this afternoon," began Michael, in a ringing voice, full of suppressed anger, which sent a thrill through each of his hearers, "no doubt you will feel considerably happier when I am safely off the premises. You, Dr. Skates," he went on, turning passionately and haughtily to that worthy gentleman, "had better tell Johnson to count the spoons."

There was a moment's dead silence. Then, without any warning but a little fluttering movement of her right hand, Miss Farebrother fainted away.

There was a general confusion. Mrs. Skates and Valetta combined their forces against the young men, scolding them, urging them to behave sensibly and properly, and to take off their overcoats and be reasonable directly. And the end of it was that, seeing how very deeply affected Miss Farebrother was by their suggested departure, they had to give way.

Feeling rather foolish, the two young men slunk off up-stairs to talk things over.

"The Skateses were as anxious to keep us here as they could be," said Gaspard, bewildered. "How do you account for that?"

Michael pondered.

"Don't you think it may be," said he, "that for one thing my aunt would reproach herself for our going away and end by turning against them? Or that, if anything were to happen to her when they were living here with her alone, the plea of undue influence could be set up more easily than if we were living here too?"

"Very likely," said Gaspard, moodily. "Then we're in for another spell of this wretched life, are we?"

"I'm afraid so," said Michael. "But listen, old chap. I'm not going to let this matter of the cheque rest. I'm going up to town to-morrow, and"—he whispered in his brother's ear—"I'm going to set a detective to work. If I'm not mistaken, we shall find something out if we keep our heads. If we can bring a few more creditors down on him, we can perhaps convince even old Buckle that he is not the man of affluence he makes out. See?"

Gaspard did see, but he was not hopeful. However, he made no objection to his brother's expedition; and on the following day Michael went up to Scotland Yard, made a statement, and asked that a detective might be sent down to St. Mary's-on-Sea, to see whether he could identify Skates as the hero of any previous criminal record. He

mentioned the name of Macdonald as one which Skates had apparently borne some years before, but no person of that name and of the appearance he described, was known at Scotland Yard.

On the whole, Michael felt less hopeful when he left the police headquarters than he had done on entering them. He knew that there are a great many rogues in the world, sham philanthropists and the like, who lie and rob, and plunder the public with both hands, and are yet artful enough to keep outside the clutches of the law. It was true that this latest exploit of Skates' seemed to promise that he was more than a potential criminal; but he was such a clever fellow, and he had got such a firm hold on Miss Farebrother's confidence, that it was not possible to take a sanguine view of the chances of bringing him to book.

Michael had given the fullest particulars he was able to the sergeant who was put in charge of the case, and was told that his instructions would be followed without delay. He was not, therefore, surprised when, a couple of days later, he saw a man whose face he did not at first recognize carrying some wood towards the house from the plantation at the end of the garden.

A second look, however, showed him that this was the detective in charge of the case; the man saluted in the manner of an ordinary dependent, but gave no sign of recognition; and Michael, satisfied, made no attempt to interrogate him.

It was in the afternoon of a day on which Miss Farebrother had arranged to give a little entertainment to the young sons and daughters of her

friends. Dr. Skates, who had entered with great gusto into the preparations, had driven over to Cliffgate to hire a lantern for the inevitable dissolving views, and he came through the gateway from the pony-carriage at that moment, looking the picture of a jolly, jovial English country gentleman, with a parcel of slides under each arm.

Michael, who was a little in the background, watched the face of the man carrying the wood at this first meeting with the suspected man. As the Doctor swung along the glass-covered passage at a great rate, the detective caught a full view of his face. Whether he forgot his professional caution in his surprise, or whether he felt no doubts about the expediency of making known his discovery, Michael did not know. But there escaped from his lips the one word:

"Anderson!"

The Doctor started, turned a scared face for one look at the man who had uttered the name, and went quickly into the house.

CHAPTER XV

HERE then was light at last! Here was a chance of finding out all about the Skateses and their antecedents! Michael felt, as, unseen by the Doctor, he noted the instantaneous expression of his face, the sudden pallor that spread over his fresh-colored cheeks, that the mystery would soon be a mystery no longer, that he should be mas-

ter, before long, of at least some of that clever gentleman's secrets.

The young man was so intent upon watching Dr. Skates, of whom he never lost sight until the door of the house had closed behind him, that it was some moments before he turned to look for the detective, who was to supply him with the precious details he wanted. But the man had disappeared.

Although it was never Michael's habit to enter the house by the servants' entrance, he was too anxious for the information in the detective's possession not to try to obtain an interview with him at once. Regardless of prudence, therefore, he went into the house by the side door, and found the detective, who was dressed in a green serge apron, engaged in chopping up the underwood under the direction of the cook, who was scolding him loudly for his slowness over the work.

"Got a new helper, eh?" asked Michael, trying to speak carelessly, and devoutly hoping that the woman would go away and leave him with the man.

But the cook still stood with her hands on her hips, and answered in a grumbling tone:—

"Not much of a help, sir. He's so slow. When there's such a lot to do as there is on a day like this too."

"Yes, I suppose you're all as busy as you can be in the kitchen," said Michael.

But she did not take the hint.

"Indeed we are, sir," said she. "It's as much

as I've been able to take a few minutes to get a cup of tea."

And as she did not move, and Michael dared not draw suspicion upon himself and the detective by calling him away, he was obliged, while inwardly fuming, to go away without the interview he so much desired.

The detective, on his side, made no attempt to meet the young gentleman half way. After the first perfunctory salutation, made with his eyes down as if he had never seen Michael before, he went on stolidly with his work, and appeared not to notice any of the side-long looks which the young man cast upon him. This conduct, though satisfactory as regarded his prudence, was extremely tantalizing to poor Michael.

The detective was the usual well set-up, broad-shouldered fellow, too robust a specimen of manhood, indeed, to masquerade very well as one of the men who applied for odd jobs of the sort he had undertaken. Fortunately for him, the lazy and well-fed servants at the Abbey were not observant people. They had a standing order from their generous mistress to give chance employment to anybody who chose to apply for it; and Watkin, for that was his name, had found it easy enough to get taken on in the character he represented of a laborer out of work.

As Michael reluctantly retired, after making some excuse to account for his presence there, he made up his mind to have the talk he wanted with the man before the evening was over.

For the rest, he had nothing much to look

forward to in the evening's entertainment. Hospitable as Miss Farebrother was, she was not very happy in her notions of providing amusement for her guests on these occasions. In the first place, she chose hours which suited nobody, being rather late for the juvenile visitors, and very early for the others. After assembling at the chill hour of half-past five, and being provided with tea and cake, the guests were expected to entertain each other with games and dances until seven, when the inevitable magic lantern entertainment or conjuring performance was to bore them all to distraction. Then the relief of supper was to be followed by more games till nine, when the juveniles were expected to retire, and allow their elders by a few years to enjoy the next two hours in their own way.

And this was a way which Michael, for one, would have found very pleasant if he had had any chance of dancing with pretty Valetta for a partner. But the young girl's discretion, since that first most pleasant tete-à-tête in the library, had prevented his exchanging more than half a dozen formal words with her; whilst it angered him greatly to see, on the other hand, that Dr. Skates, in spite of her retiring manner, managed to hold her in conversation by the half-hour together.

The artful Doctor had contrived, too, to obtain the companion's assistance in preparing the slides for the lantern, which he insisted on showing himself. And Mrs. Skates had shown herself by no means pleased with this arrangement.

When the guests began to arrive, it was the

Doctor and Mrs. Skates who received them in the big inner hall, where a fire, rather larger than was needed on a May evening, blazed in the wide hearth. Gaspard had refused to assist in the function, and Michael, who in other circumstances might have given useful help, was too much disgusted by the position taken up by the Skateses and occupied by his various anxieties to do more than scowl at the proceedings from a remote corner.

When the party from the Vicarage arrived, however, Gaspard, recognizing the one voice from the gallery where he was sulking, stole down and encountered Madeline, as she was following her younger brothers and sisters towards the drawing-room.

Greetings between the two were rather shy, rather constrained. Then Madeline said:

"I'm glad you haven't gone away yet, Mr. Farebrother."

"It's Michael's fault," said Gaspard, leading her into the breakfast-room, where excited maid-servants were pouring out tea and handing cake and buns furiously. A certain confusion which reigned in this department was favorable to Gaspard's object of separating Madeline from the rest. He shook up a cushion in the window-seat, behind a huge urn, and invited her to sit there. She hesitated.

"I must look after the little ones," she said. "I've got to see that Geoffrey doesn't eat pastry, and that Lilian——"

"Leave 'em alone. Over-eating does children

good once in a way," said Gaspard entreatingly. "You can save me from something much worse, really."

"What's that?" said Madeline, who was looking sweeter than ever in a white Liberty silk frock, with her golden hair tied with a broad blue velvet ribbon, and a simple young girl's fan in her hand.

"Cutting my throat, I think," said Gaspard dismally, though he began rather to enjoy his despair when Madeline suffered herself to be persuaded to sit in the cosy corner he had made for her.

"Oh, how wicked of you to talk like that! And when the other day you were so full of brave resolutions for fighting the world and all that!" said Madeline reproachfully.

"Well, if I could begin, I shouldn't so much mind. But to have to drag on a wretched existence here, as everybody seems to think it's our duty to do, though they don't seem to understand how precious uncomfortable it is——"

"Yes, I know. Mother and father both say you ought to stay, and I think so too," said she decidedly. "You know I told you I thought it a shame to throw up the game, as it were, and to let these two horrid people turn you out."

"It's they who won't let us go," said Gaspard. "They're afraid that, if we did, they would be accused of undue influence. Not that I should stay for their wishes. But my aunt fainted when she heard we were going, so what could we do?"

"She must care for you then, mustn't she?"

"I don't know. She doesn't seem to. I fancy she only feels it's her duty to have us near her."

"Then she's as fond of these Skateses as ever?"

"Of the Doctor, yes. I don't think she likes his wife so much as she does Miss Bell, her new companion. That's a new trouble, for the Doctor pays Miss Bell a great deal of attention, which makes her uncomfortable, and Mrs. Skates jealous."

"Is he really a doctor?"

"I don't know. He says he is not a doctor of medicine, but of science or laws or divinity or something. I shouldn't like to swear to the genuineness of his degree. But he's a very clever chap, knows a little about most things. I think's he's too clever for us; but Michael persists in standing up to him, so that things rule lively here, I can tell you. Especially since the other day, when Michael accused the Doctor to his face of having called him a thief."

"Did he, really?"

"Yes. The ladies smoothed things over as well as they could, but relations are strained among us, I can tell you."

Madeline sighed.

"It's a great shame," said she. "But I'm glad you're staying."

Gaspard looked down at her, and slid into the seat beside her. The maids were so busy running about and waiting upon the hungry crowd of juveniles, that these two had no fear of being overheard.

"Why are you glad?" said he in a low voice.

Madeline played with her fan.

"I didn't like you to be driven out by these two impostors," said she. "And—well, of course, it seems more natural to have you and Michael at the Abbey."

Gaspard had tried very hard not to do it, but the temptation was too strong.

"Supposing things had been all right, Madeline, would you ever—do you think you could ever—have cared for me?"

"I always liked you both," said Madeline, just as fully conscious as he that they were sliding over the precipice.

"Oh, but you know what I mean."

"Oh, no; don't, don't. We needn't talk about things that—that couldn't happen."

"Don't you think we may as well, from a broad, general point of view, consider things that might have happened, if fate had been a little kinder?"

Madeline caught her breath.

"What's the use?" said she, in a frightened whisper. And she would have risen and run away, but that she heard her mother's voice, and was afraid to show herself just then. She turned quickly to Gaspard. "Oh, you don't know what lectures I had to hear, and what promises I had to make, before I was even allowed to come here to-night."

Bitterly hurt, Gaspard would have jumped up and left her; but the girl, suddenly becoming aware of the intense pain her words had caused

him, put out her hand, timidly indeed, but with such a look of sad self-reproach in her eyes, that he had to linger.

"Oh, forgive me! I didn't mean——"

"It's hard, isn't it?" said he bitterly, "to know how willingly you'd have been allowed to listen if I had still been expected to have my aunt's money?"

"Oh, hush, you mustn't say that!"

"But it's the truth," said Gaspard, hotly. "You know it as well as I do. Now I couldn't be more of an 'ineligible,' I believe the ladies' word is, if I were a felon."

"Oh, it isn't fair to talk like that. You know that I——" Her voice trembled and broke.

Gaspard sat down again.

"Would you have been kind, and sweet, if you hadn't promised?" he whispered.

A sob escaped her. She said nothing, but she bowed her head in assent. He bent his head lower, so that his whispered words could just reach her ear.

"Don't say anything," said he, "I don't want you to break your word. Supposing they hadn't forbidden you, and I had asked you to wait, and to give me a chance, would you have waited?"

Madeline suddenly raised her head.

"I'm not going to break my word to mother," she said, clasping her hands tightly, and forcing herself to look away from him. "But I will just tell you this: I won't marry anybody, and I shan't want to marry anybody. I shall just—just wait."

Gaspard seized her hand, and kissed it under cover of the curtain.

"Heaven bless you! You're not like the rest. You're not mercenary——"

Madeline drew herself up.

"And mother's not mercenary, either," said she. "Everything she said was quite right, and wise."

"What was it she said?"

The girl hesitated; then she turned to look full at Gaspard.

"Yes, I will tell you," said she, "and if you will listen carefully, I think you will admit she was quite right from her point of view. She said you were both dear boys, and, as she told me, she has proved her affection for you by writing to warn you about the Skateses. But she said you were placed in a miserable and demoralizing position by this uncertainty about your prospects, and that, until something was definitely settled, it would be better—better——"

"Better to treat me as an outcast altogether," said Gaspard, bitterly.

"That's not fair," said Madeline, promptly.

After a moment's pause he admitted humbly that it wasn't. And, forced to recognize the fact that the Vicar's wife was indeed acting for the best for them both, and comforted by the girl's tender assurances, he promised her most solemnly that he would respect her mother's wishes, but told her at the same time that he would never, never care for any other girl.

It was while they were still sitting in the win-

dow-seat, in the shelter of the thick curtains, that Madeline was startled by finding a face outside the window, peering in through the glass.

She jumped up with a little cry, and Gaspard, on hearing what it was that had frightened her, opened the window quickly and looked out. There was no one to be seen, but a bush under the window was still shaking, betraying the fact that it had recently been disturbed.

Gaspard was rather annoyed at the thought that there had been an unseen witness of the tender interview between himself and Madeline; but the incident was forgotten by both quickly enough when, emerging one by one from the retirement of this window recess, they joined the rest of the guests in the drawing-room.

The lynx-eyes of Mrs. Chalmers had detected her pretty daughter's absence, and noted also that Gaspard had disappeared too. But Madeline took care to keep out of the way of her mother and of awkward explanations, for the time, at least.

Dr. Skates, after being the life and soul of the party at the opening of the proceedings, and winning even the reluctant approval of the Vicar's wife, for the cleverness he showed in amusing the children, had disappeared into the Great Hall, at the other end of the house, a magnificent apartment with an open-timbered roof, which was not often used, and where the magic-lantern entertainment was to be given.

He was accompanied by Mrs. Skates, and by the unwilling Valetta, whom he had pressed into

the service, and who would have avoided her share in the entertainment if the Doctor had not appealed to Miss Farebrother in the matter.

Although these three had begun the work of sorting the slides before the arrival of the guests, it was not finished yet, and the two ladies set to the task while the Doctor prepared the lantern.

But a difficulty arose. There was a huge fireplace at each end of the hall, and fires had been lighted in both. The heat was already great, and the flames shot up so merrily that it was plain no darkness could be obtained for the show until something was done to abate the blaze, while the audience would certainly be roasted alive.

"Ring for somebody to put one of them out altogether, Blanche," cried the Doctor, who was busy with his lantern. "And, Miss Bell, will you be kind enough to open that window?"

The girl ran across the room, and did as she was requested. The window she chose was one which opened down to the ground, so that it was the work for a moment to unfasten the eatch, and to throw it wide. As she did so, she uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter, eh?" said the Doctor, without looking round.

"Oh, it's nothing. Only there was a man looking in through the crack between the blind and the edge of the frame."

Valetta was astonished by the terror which rang out in Mrs. Skates's voice, as turning with her hand upon the bell, she cried—

"A man, do you say? What man?"

And then, before she could answer, Miss Bell noticed a strange thing. The Doctor just raised his head, and looked at his wife; and the lady sank down, trembling and without a word, into the nearest chair. Nobody spoke for a moment. Then he said, in his usual tones—

"If it's one of the servants, tell him to come in. He can help me with this."

"He's gone," said Valetta. "He went away the moment I opened the window."

That was the end of the incident. In another moment there were servants in the room, busily engaged in lowering the fires, and in cooling the room. And within another quarter of an hour the door was thrown open, and Miss Farebrother with her guests, old and young, were trooping to their seats.

All were in a somewhat penitential frame of mind, for the merriment which the Doctor had known how to excite and sustain among the young folks while he remained in the drawing-room, had had time to evaporate since he left it. None of the party cared much for magic-lantern shows, having indeed been dosed to death with them by the parochial clergy, in their laudable efforts to amuse without exciting their parishioners. But, to everybody's surprise, on this occasion the spirits of the audience rose as steadily as, during other shows of the kind, they had been in the habit of going down.

Dr. Skates, genial and bright as he always was, had never been so absolutely brilliant as he was

now. The lecture he gave, as he exhibited such well-worn stories as "Cinderella" and "Puss in Boots," convulsed both old and young with laughter. For he inserted into the series pictures which had no bearing on the story in hand ; and the ingenuity with which he dovetailed a view of Cairo and a scene from the African War into a well-worn fairy-tale was voted a triumph of humor.

The Doctor had a telling, sonorous voice, and he was completely master of the art of making a very little joke go a very long way. The consequence was that when the audience filed out of the hall on the way to the library, which was to be used as a supper-room, they were all in high good humor.

There remained in the great hall the Doctor, busy with his lantern ; Mrs. Skates, still in the same nervous state into which she had been thrown on hearing of the face outside the window ; and Valetta, who did not know whether her services were still necessary.

The gas had been turned up, and the girl was able to see the faces of both husband and wife, and to note that the Doctor looked more than usually excited, which was a not unnatural consequence of his recent exertions.

But what struck her more than the unusual animation of the Doctor's handsome face was the terrible anxiety which agitated the features of Mrs. Skates. Previous to the entertainment she had been petulant and disagreeable, having resented Valetta's being called in to help with the

slides. Now it was evident that she was no longer even conscious of the girl's presence; her still beautiful eyes were full of a most touching anxiety, and they never wandered from her husband's face.

"What—what are you going to do, Jamie?" asked she, in tremulous tones, as she crept to his side, and put her hand upon his, with an entreating gesture.

Valetta noticed this movement and was struck by the contrast between the white hand of Mrs. Skates, which was extraordinarily slender for a woman of her unwieldy size, and the broad and rather red palm of the tall Doctor. Turning quickly from the occupation on which he was engaged, Skates put his other hand quickly upon that of his wife, and said in a bright, laughing tone—

"What am I going to do? Why, wash my hands, to be sure, and get rid of some of the dust with which our Cliffgate friends have taken care to coat both the lantern and the slides. Aren't you as black as a tinker, Miss Bell?" he went on, turning to the companion, whose presence he remembered, if his wife did not.

"Yes, I think I am," she answered, rather at random, for indeed she had not noticed that the slides were dirty.

He went on, as he disengaged his hand from his wife's, and gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder—"Go, both of you, and get ready for supper as quickly as you can. These good people want no end of work to keep them going, and

they won't even have the spirit to pull a cracker, unless we go and show them the way."

The Doctor's eyes were bright, and his manner was lively, indeed almost boisterous. He had exerted himself so violently in his efforts to amuse his audience, that Valetta noticed that his forehead was wet and shining, and that the hand with which he passed his handkerchief over his face was shaking violently. The girl was rather touched, little as she liked Mrs. Skates, by the tender solicitude that lady showed for her husband. It was plain, Valetta thought, that she was afraid of the effect of such violent exertion upon a full-blooded man like the Doctor. He seemed rather amused at first, and then rather impatient, as his wife remained near him, clinging to his arm, looking up into his face.

"There, there," cried he at last, with some peremptoriness, "you really must go, both of you. Miss Farebrother expects us to help her, all of us."

Valetta took the hint at once and left the room; but as she got outside, she caught the sound, though not the sense, of a pleading whisper uttered by Mrs. Skates to her husband, in a tone so strange that, in spite of herself, the girl stopped when she heard it.

It seemed like a whisper of agony.

Valetta thought for a moment that Mrs. Skates must be ill, and instinctively she was about to return to the great hall, when the voice of the Doctor, speaking, not in his usual genial tones,

but with unmistakable harshness, checked her steps.

"Go at once—at once," he was saying very sharply, very shortly.

CHAPTER XVI

The back staircase of the house was at this end of it; and to save time Valetta, after taking a few steps in the direction of the hall, changed her mind and came back to go up by that way.

She had reached the first bend, when, having left the door of the great hall open for Mrs. Skates to follow her, she distinctly heard that lady say, in a hushed voice, but very earnestly:

"Oh, not that! Don't take that!"

She looked down, to see whether Mrs. Skates and the Doctor were coming; but not seeing or hearing anything more, she turned again, and ran up to her own room. Being, perhaps, rather excited by the strange things she had just seen and heard, and being moreover in a great hurry to get down to the supper room to help with the little ones, poor Valetta experienced the bitter truth of the old saying "More haste less speed." She shut her dress, which was of white French merino, into the door of her room, and tore off a great length of the black beaded passementerie which formed a panel up one side of it.

Very angry with herself, she had to sit down and repair the damage as quickly as she could,

but fast as her needle flew, it was a quarter of an hour before she was ready to go down-stairs again.

To make up for lost time, she went down by the way she had come up; for the back staircase was the nearest to the door of the library, where the guests were having supper.

She was half-way down, when she heard a noise underneath, as of some one beating against the garden-door with his hands. Looking over the banisters into the unlighted corner below, where this entrance was, she was sure that there was some person outside trying to get in.

She was hesitating as to whether she should go down herself to see who it was, when she saw Mrs. Skates come very quickly out of the great hall, and run round to the dark entrance at a speed surprising in one so stout as she was.

The next moment Valetta heard her draw the bolt, and then she heard a strange sound which set her heart beating fast.

It was as if Mrs. Skates had been on the point of uttering a loud cry, but had had her voice muffled by a hand put over her mouth.

Valetta, much frightened, looked over the banisters again, but the garden-door was in a corner, and she could see nothing. But, thinking that something dreadful had happened, though she could not tell exactly what she feared, Valetta cried out:

"Is that you, Mrs. Skates? What's the matter?"

There was a sound as if of struggling, and she came down two or three stairs. Then she heard

Mrs. Skates's voice, speaking unlike herself, indeed, but with decision :

"Matter? Nothing, dear. Why?"

"I thought I heard—some one with you!" faltered Valetta, who was coming downstairs as she spoke.

There was a hurried whispering, which Valetta only faintly heard, and then Mrs. Skates tried to laugh.

"Oh, yes. The Doctor's here, that's all!"

Valetta was puzzled but reassured. She came to the last stair, and looking round into the darkened passage from the garden, could make out the figures of the Doctor and Mrs. Skates. But before she could speak again, the door of the library, which was some twenty feet away, suddenly opened, and a noise of voices reached them, and made Mrs. Skates say :

"Dear, dear, haven't you had any supper?"

She was not usually so considerate for Valetta, whom she openly disliked. But now she came a little way towards her, and expressed much concern when she heard of the accident that had caused the young girl to be so late. As she did so, Mrs. Skates gradually edged Valetta back from the little passage in the direction of the library, talking all the time. But Valetta, who said little, noticed the extreme agitation of the lady's features and voice, and the trembling of her hands as she tried to persuade the girl to enter the library without further delay.

The young companion's curiosity, however, was now so strongly roused that she would not

let herself be got rid of so quickly, but contrived to loiter just long enough to see who it was that emerged, a few seconds later, from the shadowy little passage, and ran rapidly up the back staircase.

It was only Dr. Skates, however, as his wife had said, and Valetta felt that what she had supposed to be a little mystery was no mystery after all, though she had no idea what the Doctor could have been doing out in the garden so late.

She went into the library, and began at once to make herself as useful as she could by sitting between two small children who were quarrelling over a cracker they had pulled together.

Michael looked at her with an anxious frown, wondering why she had been so long away. Miss Farebrother asked her where the Doctor and Mrs. Skates were.

"They—they were in the small hall just now," answered Valetta, stammering and blushing over the words, with a consciousness that the little scene she had witnessed had seemed to her rather mysterious. "At least Mrs. Skates was; and the Doctor had just gone upstairs."

"Dear me, they shouldn't have troubled their heads about those slides! They can all be packed up in the morning by the servants," said Miss Farebrother rather petulantly.

She was conscious that the evening, which had begun so well under the Doctor's auspices, might end dismally after all if this important element of the general gaiety were missing much longer.

"Gaspard," said she, turning to her elder

nephew, "I wish you'd go and tell the Doctor to make haste, and Mrs. Skates too. Tell them not to worry about the lantern and things: they'll be all right."

"Shall I go and help?" said the vicar's wife, half-rising from her seat. "I know something about these things."

But Miss Farebrother made a petulant movement to detain her.

"Oh, no," said she, "there's no need for all this fuss at all. I can't think why they are doing this. I do hope there's been no accident with the lights or anything!"

Anxious faces turned towards her; but before anybody could go in search of an explanation, the buoyant tones of the Doctor's voice were heard in the hall outside, and everybody looked relieved. The next moment the door burst open, and the Doctor himself, laughing as he came, entered the room like a ray of sunshine, followed by Gaspard, who had met him on the stairs. The Doctor had exchanged his evening clothes for his black frock coat, and he hastened to apologize to Miss Farebrother, who made room for him at the table near her.

"My dear Miss Farebrother," said he, "I'm famished! Lecturing—especially learned lecturing of the sort I have been indulging in to-night, is hungry and still more thirsty work! Let me drink your health in a glass of champagne."

It occurred to Michael to think he looked and talked as if he had been already drinking healths, so loud of voice and vociferous was he, as he went

on to explain how he had meant to startle them all by a display of fireworks in the garden, and how, by an incautious movement with a box of wax matches, he had set fire, not only to a magnificent Catherine wheel, but to his own clothes as well. Used to associate his every speech with laughter, the children set up a shout of delight at this relation; and the Doctor entered into the fun as heartily as any of them.

"Ah! you may laugh!" cried he. "But I tell you it was no laughing matter to have to return to the house with only half one coat-tail instead of a complete pair of them"—again the little ones shrieked with laughter—"and with a beautiful pyrotechnic display going on really under my nose!"

Valetta looked at him, wondering. Was this really the explanation of the little scene she had witnessed in the passage behind the back staircase? She did not know why she doubted the story, but still she felt that she did doubt it. The next moment Miss Farebrother uttered an exclamation.

"You've hurt your hand, too," cried she, as she rose from her chair with anxiety. "If it's a bad burn, you ought to have it seen to at once, or it may cause you dreadful pain before the night's over."

"Sit down, sit down, my dear lady, and don't worry yourself about that," said he. "That's not a burn, it's only a cut. I cut myself with one of the slides that broke just as I was taking it out of the lantern at the very end of the show."

Valetta instinctively looked down at the table-cloth, as if to hide the incredulity every one might have seen in her eyes. For she had been close to the Doctor to the end of the entertainment; she remembered the incident of his putting one hand on his wife's and she could have answered for it, on oath, that his hand had at that time received no hurt or cut of any kind.

Why was he making up these strange stories? She felt hot, uncomfortable, perplexed. And to add to her confusion, just as she raised her eyes to steal a look at the Doctor, he looked at her, and it flashed through her mind that he knew he was convicting himself to her at least.

Then another care crossed the hospitable mind of the hostess.

"But what have you done with Blanche?" said she. "Isn't the poor thing to have any supper, after helping you so bravely all the evening?"

"Why, bless my soul, isn't she here?" said the Doctor, looking round at the various tables, as if in search of his wife, though here again Valetta thought that he was acting, since it was not long ago that he had left Mrs. Skates in the passage, in no mood for the frivolities of supper.

"No, she hasn't been in at all. Do, Miss Bell, run upstairs, and see if the heat has given her a headache. I know some people can't stand those lanterns," said Miss Farebrother.

Valetta rose at once, and, not heeding the expostulations of the Doctor, and his attempt to get to the door before her, ran out of the room and upstairs with the fleetness of a deer. Before she

reached the door of Mrs. Skates's room, however, she was chilled and alarmed to hear a deep moan, followed by a succession of violent sobs. She hesitated a few moments before knocking, but at last, when the sounds of grief had died away into silence, she ventured to tap on the door, and to say:

"Mrs. Skates, Miss Farebrother has sent me to ask if you have a headache. She is much troubled that you haven't been down to supper." Before she got any answer, Valetta heard the Doctor's footsteps coming quickly along the corridor, and, looking back, she was struck by the same thought that the two young men had had, that the usually wholly decorous Dr. Skates had had enough champagne to make his gait unsteady.

She was sure of this the next minute, when the Doctor, hastening his pace, came up, and deliberately put his arm round her waist.

"Come on an errand of kindness, little one?" said he, as he bent his head towards her face.

There was a light in the corridor quite near them, and as he looked down smiling into her face, the Doctor saw such an expression of unmitigated disgust and horror on the girl's beautiful features, even before she had had time to attempt to get out of his way, that he at once withdrew his arm, and patted her on the shoulder, as he added, quickly: "There's a good, kind-hearted girl! I'll go in and bring her down."

And he opened the door and entered the room, while Valetta fled down-stairs as fast as her feet could carry her. She had to wait a few moments

at the bottom of the stairs before she could trust herself to return to the supper-room without showing traces of the terrible amazement and vague dread which had seized her.

Even then, however, there was one pair of eyes quick to see that something was amiss. When, in a very few minutes, Dr. Skates returned alone, saying that his wife would be down as quickly as she could, that she had a headache, but that she would not allow Miss Farebrother to go up to her, Michael looked from the Doctor to Valetta, and saw by the expression of the girl's eyes that she doubted his words.

Michael took the opportunity of a certain movement which was now going on among the children, who were moving from their places to pull crackers, and to show off their treasures to their mothers and big sisters, to come behind Valetta's chair.

"You have eaten nothing, Miss Bell," he said.

She started, and turning, let him see by the look in her eyes that she was suffering from some acute distress. "What is troubling you?"

"Nothing," said she, of course.

"Do you know what is the matter with Mrs. Skates?" was his next rather startling question.

"No, oh no," said Valetta, falteringly.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Oh, yes, she's in her room. At least she was just now—crying."

Michael drew himself up. He had always had more indulgence for Mrs. Skates than for her husband; besides, there was a possibility, he

thought, that if there had been a quarrel between husband and wife, she might, in her excitement or resentment, let something leak out which it might be useful to know. So he said:

"I'll take her a sandwich and a glass of wine."

"I don't suppose she'll see you," warned Valetta.

"Well, I'll try."

So he slipped, unnoticed, out of the room, and went upstairs with these refreshments, and stealing very softly along the corridor, dealt on the door that particular little tap-tap, which he had often heard Dr. Skates give at the door of his wife's room.

"Come in," said a muffled voice.

Michael hesitated a moment. Then, nerving himself with the remembrance that all is fair in love and war, he opened the door. But he did not go in; he started back with so much amazement that the wine was spilt from the glass in his hand.

Kneeling in a heap by the bedside, her face swollen with tears, her dark hair streaming round her, was not Mrs. Skates, plump, placid, stolid, but—a slender girl; the girl, he could not doubt, whom he had caught and who had escaped him on that eventful night when he had watched, not in vain, in his aunt's workroom.

CHAPTER XVII.

MICHAEL had scarcely time to utter an exclamation when the girl sprang up, flew to the door, and turned the key in the lock. Rapid as were her movements, however, and artfully as she contrived, by shaking her long black hair, to make it half-cover her face as she ran, Michael felt sure that he should have no difficulty in identifying her if he saw her again. Dressed as she was, in some sort of loose garment, whether dressing-gown or tea-gown he had not time to make out, it was easy to see that the girl was tall and slender, that her hair was dark and unusually long, while there was a striking grace about her movements, rapid as they were, such as distinguished her from the ordinary run of women.

As for her face, he could scarcely say that he had seen it, certainly not that he could identify her by features alone. But of one thing he felt absolutely certain, and that was that this woman was the "spirit" which Gaspard had seen, and the midnight visitor to Miss Farebrother's room whom he himself had caught.

After remaining in the corridor for a few minutes, staring at the locked door, and wondering whether the girl was alone or whether Mrs. Skates was shut in with her, Michael went downstairs, where he found that supper was over, and that

the guests were returning to the drawing-room for more dancing.

It was at this period of the evening that the children were supposed to retire in favor of their elders; but it happened, as usual, that many of them begged and obtained permission to stay on, so that the dance that followed was still in the nature of a mixed entertainment, during which you could vary the monotony of waltzing by tumbling over aspiring but immature performers.

Michael, after a look round, found Valetta still in the supper-room, where she had been asked by Miss Farebrother to remain, and to look after Mrs. Skates. The girl jumped up quickly when Michael came in, and the color left her face as her eyes met his.

"What—what have you found out?" asked she quickly, in a whisper.

He stared at her as he put the plate and glass he was carrying down on the table.

"Found out!" echoed he in a low voice, for the servants were still busy at some of the tables. "What should I find out? What do you know?"

Valetta hesitated before answering. In spite of her valiant efforts to keep her word to Miss Farebrother, and to maintain absolute impartiality towards those two contending parties of which the household consisted, she knew very well that she was biassed, and this knowledge made her all the more cautious, all the more reticent. So that, although she was quite conscious that there was some little mystery about the movements of the

Skateses on that evening, she did not wish to make any avowal until it was absolutely forced from her.

So she evaded his question, and looked down, biting her lip with vexation at the indiscreet question she had herself uttered.

"I thought you looked—looked scared, Mr. Michael," she said, resuming her seat, and trying to speak in an utterly indifferent tone.

"And you were not surprised, I think," said Michael quickly, as he took the next chair to hers and looked searchingly into her face. "Come now, you've seen something or heard something to-night that has startled you and made you suspicious of these people. It's of no use to deny it; I've watched your face."

"I've heard something that surprised me a little, but I'm not so suspicious as you are."

"Will you let me tell you what has made me suspicious?" asked he, flushing a little, and nettled at her tone.

She hesitated.

"I think I'd rather not," she began.

Michael stood up, offended, and uttered a short laugh. The servants had by this time left the room, and he could speak more freely.

"I admire your prudence," said he. "Certainly you are wise to disregard my aunt's injunction, and to take sides—with the winning party."

Then, to his astonishment, the quiet girl turned upon him with fire.

"What do you mean?" she asked quite fiercely.

"I mean that these Skateses have formed a plot

together with another person to ruin my brother and me, and that you are clever enough to see that they are succeeding."

"Are they?" said Valetta quickly. "Now, from what I have seen to-night I should say that it is you who, not satisfied with what you can find out yourself about these people, have got somebody to watch them, and are therefore ahead of them in the game."

Michael was astonished.

"To watch them!" said he.

"I can't be sure it was you who had them watched, of course," admitted Valetta, though she saw by the surprised and guilty look on his face that her guess had been a good one. "But there was a man watching them through the windows of the great hall to-night."

"Well, there may have been," said Michael. "But it would take a lot of watching to bring such artful customers as the Doctor to book," he added gloomily.

Valetta laughed a little.

"I must be going," she said at last, after a silence.

"Where?" asked Michael.

"To see if Mrs. Skates is coming downstairs again to-night. She would not speak to you, I see." And she glanced at the sandwich he had brought back and at the untasted wine.

"No," said Michael angrily, "I did not see her. But I saw a woman who is a fellow-conspirator of these two, and whose presence on the premises means that there will be an attempt

made to-night to play upon my aunt's feelings by means of a trick."

And, as Valetta could not conceal the interest and curiosity she felt at these words, he persuaded her to sit down again, and to listen to his account of the "vision" Gaspard had seen, of his own capture and loss of the "spirit," and finally of his coming face to face that evening with the mysterious long-haired girl.

"Who do you think she can be?" asked Valetta, looking at him with wide eyes full of affright.

"Some relation of theirs, I think. How they manage to smuggle her in and out of the house I don't know."

But here Valetta was struck by a bright idea.

"I think I can guess," said she. "There was some sort of mystery going on at the garden entrance by the back staircase to-night. I saw Mrs. Skates there, and the Doctor, and I wondered why she was so anxious to get rid of me. I suppose they had this girl there with them, and they had just let her in."

Michael listened thoughtfully, and decided to see the detective in the morning, and to ask whether he had seen any woman approaching the house. The more Valetta told him about that mysterious incident at the backdoor, the more probable did it seem that the girl was admitted by that way, and that the evident alarm of Mrs. Skates, described by Valetta, had been caused by the neighborhood of the detective. Things promised on the whole to clear up a little, he

thought. And, oh, joy of joys! Valetta no longer made any attempt to conceal the fact that her sympathies were all on the side of Miss Farebrother's nephews, and against the Doctor and his wife and their fellow-conspirator, the girl with the long dark hair.

"I wonder——" began she. And then she stopped.

"What?"

"Whether I could find anything out. It isn't a very nice thing to play detective, but I really feel afraid of these people, and I would do anything, anything to get them out of the house."

"Why, what do you propose to do?" asked Michael, leaning on his elbow, and looking up confidentially into her pretty face.

They were still sitting at the table, but Valetta had clasped her hands, and was turning to look at the fire, thinking deeply before she spoke again. Both were wearing the air of being deeply interested, and were indeed so much absorbed, either in each other or in the subject in hand, that neither heard the door open, nor saw the angry face of Miss Farebrother in the doorway.

It was not until a sharply uttered "Miss Bell!" struck suddenly upon their ears that they both jumped up with a most guilty start, and stood, shamefaced, and at first speechless, before the offended old lady.

"Y—yes, Miss Farebrother," stammered Valetta at last.

Miss Farebrother waved her hand toward the

door, looking at her nephew with a frown of exceeding displeasure upon her face ; Michael began to move slowly towards her, but she, with another and still angrier gesture, forbade him to approach her.

"I shall be glad," said she, looking not at his face but at the floor, "if you will join my guests —my other guests—in the drawing-room. I have something to say to Miss Bell."

"Very well, Aunt."

Miss Farebrother did not lose any time. The moment her nephew had left the room she turned sharply to her unfortunate companion.

"I see, Miss Bell," said she icily, "how much faith there is to be placed in your promises, your assurances. You told me you would not take sides in the unhappy dissensions in this house, and yet I find you undeniably on the most confidential terms with my nephew Michael, the cause of all my worries."

"I felt sorry for him, Miss Farebrother," said Valetta, firmly but modestly, clasping her hands in front of her and speaking very gently, "and so I listened to what he had to say."

"Well, I will tell you this : if he was making love to you——"

"He was not," interrupted the girl proudly.

"So much the better," retorted the old lady. "For if he had been so foolish, and if you had been unwise enough to encourage him, I should simply have cut him off from all participation in the benefits he may hope to derive from his position as my nephew."

"I think you are most unjust, unfair!" cried Valetta with spirit.

"Not at all," replied Miss Farebrother. "For you had both been warned; he not to promote further disagreements in my household, and you not to hold more intercourse with my nephews than was necessary."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Farebrother, but that was not what you told me," cried Valetta, who was much too proud to allow herself to be reproached without defending herself. "What you told me was that I was not to take sides. But as you even encouraged me to be civil to Dr. and Mrs. Skates, and made me help them this evening, I was bound in order not to take sides, to be civil to your nephew too."

Now, Miss Farebrother was not entirely without a sense of humor, and this apt reply mollified her a little. It was in a slightly less acid tone that she said, "You have a sharp tongue. But it is a dangerous gift. May I trouble you to go again to Mrs. Skates? Tell her I am worried and distressed that she had not come downstairs again."

"Yes, Miss Farebrother."

Valetta left the room, and ran lightly upstairs. Her heart was beating very fast, for she meant to use eyes as sharp as that tongue against which she had just been warned. When, therefore, she was admitted into Mrs. Skates's room, which was not until she had been kept outside some minutes, and until she had warned the lady that Miss Farebrother would come herself if she were not ad-

mitted, it was with the very steady determination not to leave the apartment without making some discoveries.

She found Mrs. Skates lying on a sofa at the foot of the bed, with the gas turned low, and a strong smell of eau-de-cologne about.

"It's very kind of Miss Farebrother and of everybody to send and come up so often," said Mrs. Skates, in a tone of decided irritability, "but it would be a still greater kindness if they would leave me alone."

"Was it the lantern that made your head ache so badly?" asked Valetta in the softest of voices, as, taking advantage of the fact that Mrs. Skates was pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, she examined the room as well as she could, peering behind the curtains and under the bed with deft and rapid movements.

Still with her handkerchief pressed to her forehead Mrs. Skates answered, "Yes; it always affects me like that. But I shall be all right presently, if I can only be left by myself a little. I don't want any supper. Pray tell Miss Farebrother not to come."

"Oh, I don't think she will, if I can assure her you are comfortable, and only want rest," said Valetta, who was still looking carefully into the corners of the room.

There was no dressing-room attached to this apartment, and only the one door. But there was a cupboard by the fireplace, and a hanging wardrobe, and Valetta had made up her mind not to leave the room until she had found out whether

the girl with the long dark hair were concealed in either of these hiding-places.

"You don't look very comfortable, you know," she said at last, when she had satisfied herself that those two were the only possible places where a person could hide. "Won't you let me cover you with something? It's getting chilly, and you haven't got much of a fire."

As she spoke, she made a step towards the wardrobe; but Mrs. Skates said quickly, "Oh, no, no, I'm quite warm enough, thank you. Don't——"

But Valetta, more absolutely sure than ever that there was something to be concealed, ran lightly across the room, and opened the door of the wardrobe. To her disappointment, there was nothing there but Mrs. Skates's dresses, and she was a little surprised to see that that lady was sitting up and looking at her movements with apparent anxiety.

"Is there anything here that you would like me to throw over you?" asked the girl, acting her part very well, so that Mrs. Skates was deceived into thinking she had no suspicions as to the contents of the wardrobe.

"No, nothing, nothing, thank you. All I want is a little rest."

Valetta, however, had no sooner closed the door of the wardrobe than she ran across to the cupboard; Mrs. Skates still sitting up to watch her.

"Perhaps I can find something here," she said.

To which Mrs. Skates rather tartly replied—

"Really, Miss Bell, I wish you would leave my things alone."

Valetta, however, did not desist from her labors until she had satisfied herself, to her bewilderment and disappointment, that there was no one but themselves in the room. Then she went up to the sofa, and Mrs. Skates lay down again with a sigh.

"Now, isn't there something you would like me to fetch for you?" asked Valetta, suddenly conscious that she was not showing much sympathy for the self-styled invalid. "A cup of tea? Or anything?"

She bent over the sofa, and met Mrs. Skates's eyes looking full into hers, with an expression which made her aware that the Doctor's wife was conscious of the extent of her solicitude.

"No," said Mrs. Skates, very shortly. "I only wish you would go away."

Valetta said nothing to this. Perhaps she felt that acting was by this time thrown away. She returned the look the elder lady gave her by one quite as direct, quite as steady. It was Mrs. Skates whose eyes fell first. Turning her head uneasily on the cushion, she said in a peevish voice:

"I'm very much obliged to you for your kindness, Miss Bell, but I'm afraid you don't understand the feelings of a person with a bad headache."

Then Valetta withdrew from the sofa, with a curious expression on her face, an expression

which made Mrs. Skates anxious and uneasy again.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I've disturbed you," said the companion, as she retreated towards the door so quickly that the other lady, with a fresh access of curiosity, sat up once more.

"I—I didn't mean that," said she, half apologetically, as she scanned the face of her visitor with much intentness. "Where—where are you going?"

"To Miss Farebrother, to tell her not to come up," answered Valetta.

Mrs. Skates still stared at her suspiciously.

"And after that to flirt with my husband, I suppose?" she burst out, with sudden bitterness.

Valetta drew herself up.

"If you really think there is any danger of that," she said quietly, "you can easily prevent it by coming downstairs yourself to keep watch over his movements."

For one moment the face of the elder lady was convulsed with a strange fear; the next, she lay quietly down again with a frightened look at Valetta, who, without any further delay, went out of the room and shut the door softly after her.

She had not gone many steps before she heard the key again turned in the lock of Mrs. Skates's door.

There was nobody Valetta was now more anxious to avoid than the unfortunate Michael, for she knew that Miss Farebrother's threat had been uttered in all sincerity, and she did not want to bring him into further disgrace; but with the

headstrong rashness of youth Michael went out of his way to expose himself to danger, and to render the girl's prudence unavailing.

Before she had got to the bottom of the stairs on her way to the drawing-room Miss Farebrother's younger nephew suddenly appeared by her side, springing from she knew not where.

"Well," said he, "what did my aunt say to you?"

"She said," answered Valetta demurely, "that she would punish you if you talked to me."

"Well, I don't care," burst out Michael.

Valetta cut him short:

"But I do!"

"You won't let me speak to you?"

"Not more than I can help. It would be folly in us both. Because if we disregard her wishes Miss Farebrother will send me away, and I don't want to go away."

"I'm glad of that, at any rate."

"Because I think I can be of some use here," went on Valetta significantly.

"What!" cried Michael, "have you found out anything?"

"I think so," said Valetta, with her finger on her lip.

"You'll tell me what it is?"

She shook her head.

"Just tell me this. Have you found out anything about the girl with the dark hair?"

Valetta hesitated.

"Yes," said she, at last.

"Did you catch a glimpse of her?"

"I think so."

"Do you know how she gets in and out of the house?"

"Yes."

"And won't you tell me all about it?"

"No, not yet."

With another, and more decided shake of the head, Valetta ran away, just in time to avoid having this colloquy interrupted by Dr. Skates, who was coming out of the drawing-room as she reached the bottom stair.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Doctor hastened his steps on seeing Valetta, and she, on her side, after a moment's apparent hesitation, deliberately waited to meet him. He passed his hand over his forehead, pushing back his long gray hair, and heaved a great sigh.

"Oh, these good folks!" said he, good-humoredly, but with some appearance of fatigue, "what a lot of work it does take to keep them amused! I've just set them going at a barn dance, and even had a turn at it myself. Come, you ought to be dancing, too!"

"Miss Farebrother sent me upstairs to see Mrs. Skates," said Valetta.

A quick look of inquiry appeared in the Doctor's eyes, and there was a moment's pause before he said:

"And how did you find her? Did she let you in? She wouldn't see me just now. She was just a wee bit cross, and inclined to be disagreeable."

"Well, she has a headache," said Valetta. "That does make people cross, doesn't it?"

"Some people," answered the Doctor, smiling. "Now, I don't think even a bad headache would ruffle your temper. You always seem good-humored and bright!"

"One has to control one's feelings when one is in such a position as mine," said the girl.

"And do you often feel very cross and disagreeable, while you are smiling at us, and doing your best to be obliging and kind?" asked the Doctor, in much amusement.

"Well, perhaps I do, but I'm not going to confess too much," said Valetta.

Dr. Skates looked at her with a shrewd expression of admiration, not unmingled with surprise.

"You're an odd little girl," said he at last. "You don't mind my saying that, do you?"

"Not a bit," said Valetta, secretly wondering at the change which had come over his manner in the course of the last half hour.

All trace of the over-excitement which had filled her with misgivings, of the over-familiarity which had alarmed her when she met him in the corridor, had now disappeared. He was genial, charming, in a word he was himself again. When he spoke it was with a manner grown suddenly a little more serious.

"I have to thank you very heartily, Miss Bell," said he, "for your kind help with the lantern this evening. And I must apologize for my wife's fretfulness. She's a dear, good soul, but just a little apt to be trying sometimes, I know."

In his tone there was a slight shade of gentle melancholy, as if he had suffered a good deal from that fretfulness in time past.

"Well, you are very patient," said Valetta.

The Doctor sighed.

"It has always been a firm conviction of mine, and one which I have sought to carry into practice, that a man should stand by his wife through thick and thin, no matter what he may have to suffer at her hands," he said gravely. "It's not fair for a man to marry a girl when she is young and beautiful, and then to neglect her when she is old, even if she makes him suffer by her temper and her tongue. A man should stand by his bargain to the end, even if he feels he is having the worst of it. Don't you agree with me?"

"Indeed I do, Dr. Skates," said Valetta.

"Even if," the Doctor went on, "her unreasonable jealousy should make life something of a burden, and should cut one off from the harmless but delightful pleasures of congenial and charming society."

He said this with just enough significance for it to be complimentary without being too pointed. Valetta could only bow her head in assent. She was rather glad that at that moment two or three children came from the drawing-room on their

way out, and gave her the excuse of getting away from the Doctor.

The last of the guests had left the house before twelve o'clock, and Gaspard and Michael had gone up to their rooms on the second floor, when the younger of these two, hearing a sound of angry voices from the floor below, told his brother that he meant to go downstairs and find out what it was.

But Gaspard would have stopped him.

"You know very well what it is," said he. "It's the Doctor quarrelling with his wife. Surely you wouldn't play the spy, and condescend to listen."

But Michael laughed.

"You're Quixotic," said he. "Of course I shouldn't listen to conversation not meant for me in any ordinary case. But this is not an ordinary case. Here's a swindler firmly established in the midst of us, and it will take all the means at our disposal to root him out. Let me go."

And he freed himself roughly from the grasp of his brother's hand, and stole downstairs.

The voices came from the Doctor's room, and Michael, as he crept up to the door, could make out that Mrs. Skates was upbraiding her husband, and that his efforts were directed to soothing and silencing her. Very few words reached Michael's ears, only the passionate sobbing of the woman and the earnest tones of the man, until the woman's voice suddenly wailed out:

"After all I've done for you, suffered for you, after to-night—this awful night, oh, it's too bad! I can't bear it!"

Again the Doctor soothed, pacified; but only for a few moments. After a silence her voice rang out again:

"I know you mean to throw me over, as you did before. All for this girl!"

Again the Doctor spoke, but he was always too clever to let his words rise above a whisper. Then Mrs. Skates spoke again, and although her voice, too, was low, yet the more piercing tones of the woman carried her words far enough for Michael to be able to make them out with sufficient distinctness.

"Oh, yes, she'll serve your purpose, of course. But I don't mean to be shelved again. If you try to get away this time, as you did before, I'll——"

What the threat was that she would have uttered Michael never knew, for by the sound which followed he was sure that the Doctor was muffling her speech by physical force. Gurgling, gasping, the woman's voice sobbed out: "Don't, oh, don't!"

And then there was dead silence.

Although he had braved the matter out with his brother, Michael had come downstairs with a very shamefaced feeling that the step he was taking of listening to talk not meant for him was despicable and unworthy.

No sooner, however, had he heard these words than he at once felt justified in his own eyes. No means must be neglected in the effort to get rid of two people so wholly dangerous and untrustworthy as the Doctor and his wife had proved

themselves, by the lips of the latter, to be. As he stole quietly away from the door, satisfied that he had heard enough to justify his worst suspicions, Michael was seized by the torturing thought that the woman of whom Mrs. Skates was jealous was not, after all, the girl with the long dark hair, but pretty Valetta Bell, with whom the Doctor certainly lost no chance of ingratiating himself.

The thought was a poisoned dart to the unhappy Michael, whose love for the girl had increased with every day that he passed under the same roof with her.

He told himself that she was too high-minded to listen to the Doctor's flatteries, too clever to be taken in by his artifices. Nevertheless, he remembered how often he had seen her in conversation with the Doctor, and although he knew that these talks were not of her seeking, the uneasy consciousness remained that she had not avoided them.

Uneasy and restless, Michael could not go to bed. He knew that sleep for him, in his agitated condition, was out of the question, and instead of going upstairs, he crept along the corridor, and turned the corner into the East wing, where he sat down in a window-seat from which he could get a wide view of the garden and grounds, and look disconsolately out at the pathway of moonlight which now spread over the lawn.

He had, in so doing, no practical object whatever. He meant to see the detective in the morning, and to find out all about Dr. Skates's antecedents in the character of "Anderson;" but

he had no suspicion that Watkin would be on the watch at this time of night, when he might well suppose the man he was shadowing to be in bed and asleep.

When, therefore, his attention was suddenly called to the fact that there was a dark object moving under the trees at the other side of the lawn, he was unfeignedly surprised. He stood up, strained his eyes to look out. He was, however, much too far away, and the light of the moon was too fitful for him to ascertain anything further; and as he could make out nothing more, he began to think his fancy had misled him.

He remained, however, sitting in the window-seat and looking out towards the plantation for some considerable time, during which no sight or sound attracted his attention. He had just made up his mind to go up to his room and try to get some sleep when it occurred to him to raise the window a little way, and he had scarcely done this when a faint sound, occurring at regular intervals, convinced him that something unusual was going on outside.

So he shut the window down very softly, stole down-stairs, and let himself out by one of the garden doors.

By this time he could hear the sound more plainly, without yet being able to make out what it was. He was pretty certain, however, that it proceeded from the plantation, and it was there that he had thought he saw a figure under the trees.

Skirting the lawn very cautiously to avoid cross-

ing the path of somewhat murky moonlight, Michael soon reached the shelter of the trees. Behind a yew hedge which cut off the lawn and flower garden from the rest of the grounds, there was an enormous stack of underwood, built up and stored for household use, and as he approached this from one side, Michael was pretty sure that the work, which he now thought must be that of digging, was in progress on the other. Who could be at work at such a time? And with what object was he pursuing his mysterious labors? Full of a mysterious sense that he was on the track of some deed uncanny if not unlawful, the young man slackened his speed, so that no cracking of a dry branch, no rustle of young leaves, should betray his presence to the still unseen worker. Unluckily for his purpose, before he reached the stack of brushwood, the moon was entirely obscured by a thick cloud. Should he wait until its full light shone out again? Or should he go on blindly, and seize the mysterious personage in the dark?

He was by this time half-way round the stack, and through the protruding twigs he saw, indistinctly indeed, but without any possibility of a doubt as to the main fact, that a man was at work on the end of the potato patch, digging in the ground.

Stupefied with amazement, Michael stared in silence for a few moments, until the sudden giving way of part of the brushwood under the hand with which he was parting the twigs, betrayed the fact of his presence.

He could see the man stop in his work and turn. Feeling that he could no longer remain in concealment, Michael came out into the open. Instantly the man flung down his spade and began to run away at the top of his speed. Michael at once gave chase; but he had not gone twenty steps when, crossing without heed the very place where the man had been at work, his right leg sank into a deep hole, and he fell prostrate on the ground, uttering a sharp cry of pain.

Without knowing exactly what had happened to him, except that he was so much hurt as to be for a moment sick and incapable of movement, Michael presently recovered himself and made one brisk attempt to get out of the hole and on his feet again.

Then the agony which convulsed him in every limb told him the truth. With a moan he fell forward on his face, clutching the grass and weeds with straining fingers. He was powerless, helpless: his right leg was broken.

He tried to cry out, and felt, even at that moment, astonishment to find how weak his voice had suddenly become; then it was as if some one else called out for help, and he found himself raising his head to listen. Then, as he felt the perspiration rolling down his cold face, he shivered, and knew that it was not to another voice, not to an echo of his own, but to his own cry that he had been listening.

A little broken laugh died on his lips, and he sank shivering, face downwards, on the ground again.

He could never tell afterwards just what happened: he thought he went to sleep and woke up again, and slept once more, at short intervals, for what seemed a long, long time. And while he was neither asleep, nor fully awake, some one came stealthily up to him, approaching him from behind. Half afraid that he was going to be murdered, and yet not quite sure whether he was dreaming or not, Michael had sense enough left to tell himself that he had better lie quite still, and not ask this unknown, unseen creature for assistance.

And then he lost consciousness altogether once more.

Presently, however, he came to himself with a start, saw some one in the blackness under the trees, and was impelled, rather by instinct than by what he saw, to cry out:

"Doctor! Doctor Skates!"

No one came, however, and the figure he half saw, half imagined, faded away altogether, as Michael, exhausted with his efforts to make himself heard, sank again into silence.

It was very shortly after this that Gaspard was roused from sleep by a loud knocking at his door.

"Mr. Gaspard! Mr. Gaspard!"

He sprang out of bed, wondering, recognizing two voices one of which was Valetta Bell's.

It was her voice which then said:

"Will you please go to Mr. Michael's room, and see if he's there. We've knocked at his door, and can't get any answer."

Gaspard dressed hastily, and went out into the

corridor, where he found Valetta and one of the maidservants, whom she had roused from sleep in the first place. She then told Gaspard, as he crossed the corridor to his brother's room, that she had been sitting up with a book, when she had a fancy she heard a cry. Opening her window, she said she fancied she heard Michael's voice calling out, 'Doctor, Doctor Skates!' She added that she had then run to the servants' rooms, roused one of the housemaids, and asked her to come with her. They had knocked at Michael's door, but had got no answer.

In a very few seconds Gaspard had discovered his brother's absence, and a great commotion followed. The household was roused: Miss Farebrother and Dr. and Mrs. Skates all came out of their rooms. Everybody asked everybody else questions which no one could answer.

In the meantime, Valetta persisted in her assertion that the cry she had heard came from out of doors. It had sounded quite faint until she had opened the window.

A search party was organized, and it was not long before Valetta and Gaspard came upon the unfortunate Michael, who, on hearing the shouts they all raised, had just had strength enough to utter a groan in reply.

He was at once carried indoors, and a doctor was sent for, who set his broken leg, and did what he could for the unfortunate man, who was stiff and benumbed with the cold.

He was anxious to ask questions, to enter into explanations, but this the doctor resolutely forbade.

"Unless you will promise to lie quietly, and without any attempt at talking," he said, "I shall have to spend the rest of the night with you myself. By the by," he added, turning to that group of members of the sympathetic sex who had been assisting him in his work, "who's going to sit by him and look after him?"

Mrs. Skates at once offered her services, and at once the patient electrified everybody by calling out from the bed an emphatic "No!"

This rather awkward little incident having been passed over it was decided by Miss Farebrother that Jarman should be sick nurse—Jarman, the discreet, the reticent, the safe.

Michael made a wry face, but he submitted.

Indeed there was nothing else to be done, for he was very ill. The illness caused by his broken limb had been greatly aggravated by cold and exposure, so that the doctor felt considerable anxiety about him.

In spite of all admonitions, however, there was one thing upon which he insisted on the following morning.

He told Jarman that he must see the odd man who had been engaged on the previous day, and directed her to bring the man to his room quietly, without saying anything about it to anybody. This would be the easier, as it had been thought undesirable to carry Michael up-stairs, and the breakfast-room had been turned into a sick-room for his accommodation.

Jarman, who saw that it would not do to refuse

him, went obediently, after some vain protest, in search of the odd man.

She returned, however, in a few minutes, with the unwelcome intelligence that he had disappeared.

At first Michael was inclined to doubt her, and when her manner showed him that she was telling the truth, he grew excited, full of the conviction that this disappearance portended an arrest. No doubt Watkin had gone back to Scotland Yard, armed with full information, and ready for immediate action.

"He was working up to late last night, and he promised to be here the first thing this morning, by half-past seven, in fact. Cook's in a regular taking because he hasn't turned up," went on Jarman.

And then an odd doubt that sent a shiver through him, darted into Michael's mind.

Why had the man promised to come again, if he meant to go back at once to town? There was nothing to be gained, but some suspicion to be risked, by telling such a tale? And why had he not at least waited for the chance of a few words with Michael, who had employed him on this work?

CHAPTER XIX

JARMAN was alarmed by the effect of her news upon the invalid. On learning that the "odd man," whom he knew to be Watkin, the detective,

had disappeared, Michael was seized by a sinister thought. Had the astute Doctor Skates "nobbled" the man who knew too much? Had he bribed the officer to return to Scotland Yard to report that he had been put upon a wrong scent?

Michael hardly knew why such thoughts as these should find the place they did in his imagination, since, apart from the utter improbability that a detective of experience would suffer himself to be bought so easily by a rogue, there remained the fact that such a proceeding must inevitably lead to his own detection at no distant date.

How great, too, would be the credit obtainable by the detective if he succeeded in bringing to book an old offender, who had escaped the clutches of the law for a long time!

The worry and excitement of his surmises and conjectures promised to make Michael's illness a long and serious one. A couple of trained nurses had already been sent for, for although Miss Farebrother did not come to see her nephew herself, after the first visit she had paid on the previous night, she spared no expense in having him properly attended.

Besides this matter of the disappearance of Watkin, there remained the mystery of the events of the night before to disturb Michael. Who was the man whom he had surprised in the strange work of digging a hole in the ground in the middle of the night? Was it Watkin who had been thus engaged? And if so, what had he done it for? And why had he run away at the approach

of footsteps, and darted off at breakneck pace to avoid pursuit?

Michael had indeed a fancy that he caught sight of a figure like that of Dr. Skates, when he himself was lying helpless on the ground. But he could not swear that this was not the result of a feverish and wandering imagination acting upon the fact that the Doctor and his wife had been much in his thoughts during the evening.

What did it all mean? What would clever Valetta Bell think of it?

There was no way of getting a talk with her; he tried to induce Jarman to ask her to come to him for a few minutes, but to this the staid servant only replied that Miss Bell was with Miss Farebrother and Mrs. Skates, both of whom were very much upset by the disturbances of the night. Jarman did not dare to deliver any such message, as long as the young lady was with the other ladies at any rate.

Poor Valetta, indeed, was having a trying time with the two ladies upstairs. Miss Farebrother had insisted upon Mrs. Skates' coming to her as usual in the morning, although it was plain from the appearance the unfortunate woman presented that she ought to have remained in bed. But the truth was that Miss Farebrother had been seized by suspicion of everybody around her, and had made up her mind, to all appearance, to put their devotion to the proof.

With Valetta her manner was cold and capricious, and the poor little companion was not long in discovering the cause of this.

"How was it that you were the first person to hear my nephew when he called out?" she asked sharply, when Valetta was kneeling down in front of her, trying to disentangle the threads of the old lady's embroidery.

Valetta started and reddened a little.

"I was the only person awake, I suppose," said she.

"And why were you awake? It must have been three or four o'clock in the morning!"

"I don't quite know. I had been to bed, and couldn't sleep. So I got up, lit a candle, and began to read."

"Most dangerous things—candles in a bedroom!" murmured Mrs. Skates fretfully.

"Oh, I was sitting up at the table," explained Valetta.

"And how was it you recognized Michael's voice? It seems to me very odd!" went on Miss Farebrother.

To this Valetta made no reply whatever. She drew her lips rather closely together, and bent over her task, while the two elder ladies exchanged glances.

"I wonder what on earth he was doing out of doors, at such a time of night," then said Miss Farebrother. "He's always doing something to upset us all! I've no doubt he was in mischief of some kind."

"He certainly has a most unfortunate habit of rousing the house in the middle of the night," remarked Mrs. Skates. "This is the third or fourth scare he has given us all. And he always

seems rather proud of himself, instead of apologizing to you for disturbing your rest, dearest."

"He's most inconsiderate," said the old lady sharply. "I think you and the good Doctor must begin to repent your good nature in persuading them to stay here, when they pretended to have made up their minds to go away."

Now both the elder ladies, being in a cross and irritable mood after the disturbed night they had had, were most anxious to provoke Valetta to retort, so that they could turn their anger upon her. But she was too artful for them. She just bent her pretty head lower, and pressed her lips tightly together, and let them abuse the unfortunate Michael without uttering a word in his defence.

But when she was at last for a few minutes off duty, she ran down into the garden for a breath of fresh air, with a very flushed and angry little face.

Dr. Skates presently joined her, as she was walking round the lawn in the spring sunlight. She had turned her steps in the direction of the spot where Michael had been discovered on the previous night.

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid?" asked the Doctor, who was as fresh as a lark, and presented a striking contrast to the wan faces of the ladies.

"Oh, I'm only going to see the place where Mr. Michael fell down," said she.

"You'll get your feet very wet," said the Doctor, dissuasively, "the dew's been falling heavily, and the grass is long all round there."

But Valetta had made up her mind. She went

steadily on through the double belt of elms, past the yew hedge, and across the potato patch until she had got to the place where, as she judged, the unlucky man had been found. Then she stopped short with an exclamation; and the Doctor, who had lingered by the hedge, looked up and called out:

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, Dr. Skates," cried she, "come here and look. Isn't it exactly as if—"

She stopped short and began to look about her with rather a frightened face. The Doctor came across to her at once, and asked quickly:

"My dear child, what's the matter? You look quite frightened?"

Indeed the girl was white and trembling, and it was some seconds before she said:

"Look there, look, look! Isn't it like a grave? As if some one had been digging a grave there?"

Even the Doctor was shocked by this suggestion. He glanced at her quickly, and changed color, and did not at once speak. Then he said, speaking hoarsely, and in short jerks:

"What a horrid, ugly notion! What makes you think——"

Valetta tried to laugh.

"Oh, of course I know it isn't that," she said, surprised at the effect of her own words. "But doesn't it really look like one? You see the hole is long and narrow, and rather deep. It's just like a grave that is nearly finished, now isn't it? And to think," she went on with a sudden

burst of tears, "that—that—if we hadn't heard him, it might really——"

She could not go on. Really the Doctor seemed almost as much moved as she was. The girl liked him for it, was comforted to see the pallor of her own face reflected in his.

"My dear, dear young lady," he said, and his voice was still hoarse and even broken, "you mustn't get such ideas into your head. Why, if you were to say that to your aunt, or to my wife——"

"Oh, but I shouldn't," interrupted Valetta, quickly. "You may trust me, Dr. Skates. I should know better than that."

"Why, what on earth put such a dreadful notion into your head?"

He was trying to draw her away from the hole in the ground—but it seemed to have a sinister fascination for her.

"Doctor, what do you think this hole was for?" she asked, suddenly. "Who made it? Look, the earth has been freshly turned over. It can't have been done long!"

"Come away, and don't trouble your head about such things!" cried the Doctor, as with an impatient pull, he took her right away from the spot. "It's part of some of the gardener's work. No doubt they made it to store potatoes in, or turnips. Come away, and don't worry yourself about it any more."

But Valetta, though she said nothing more about the strange hole in the ground, went back to look at it again when the Doctor had gone

indoors. And the more she looked, the more uncanny did it appear to her.

When she went back into the house, she found Dr. and Mrs. Skates in the dining-room, the latter in tears. It was evident that she was still suffering from the events of the previous night.

"Here's a pretty business!" cried the Doctor, as soon as Valetta entered the room. "My wife is totally unnerved by the fright we had in the night, and is hardly fit to be about. And I'm pretty certain Miss Farebrother will be ill too, with all this worry and excitement." Mrs. Skates started up from her chair, and would have run out of the room, but her husband, with sudden gravity and with great kindness of manner, stopped her and made her sit down.

"My dear Miss Bell," said he, "would you touch the bell for me? She must have a glass of wine to steady her nerves. We don't want to have a whole houseful of invalids!"

"Don't you think," suggested Valetta, as she did what he asked, "that she would be better in bed? She seems utterly worn out."

Mrs. Skates suddenly drew herself up, and darted quite a fierce look at the girl.

"I shall not go to bed," she said sharply. "I am quite well." And then she sank down on a chair, and burst into a flood of hysterical tears.

The Doctor went to her side, and Valetta took the opportunity of trying to slip quietly out of the room, for the manner in which Mrs. Skates regarded her was too openly inimical to be pleasant to bear. She had scarcely touched the handle of

the door, however, when Mrs. Skates started up from her seat, and asked harshly :

"Where are you going?"

"Only to see whether Miss Farebrother wants me," answered the young companion, rather taken aback by this tone.

"You shall not go. You shall not take my place," burst out Mrs. Skates hysterically, while Valetta paused and looked at the Doctor, uncertain what to do.

She was not without suspicions of the Doctor as well as of his wife ; for the mysterious events of the previous evening and the words of Michael were still fresh in her memory. But the Doctor's manner was so good, so hearty and unaffected, that it was impossible not to feel one's prepossessions against him melting away while the charm of his presence was upon one.

Mrs. Skates, on the other hand, by her petulance and unkindness, had already made a very unpleasant impression upon Valetta, which certain discoveries she had made the night before had only tended to strengthen.

Thus it was that the young companion intinctively looked to the Doctor, uncertain what to do in the face of this outburst on the part of his wife.

He gave her a little reassuring nod, as if he quite understood the difficulties of her position, and then turned in a soothing manner to his wife.

"Very well, my dear," he said, patting her shoulder as if she had been a child, and directing the servant, who had now entered the room in

answer to the summons, to bring some sherry, "very well. Miss Bell only wants to know that Miss Farebrother is not being neglected, don't you?" And he turned to the girl with a little frown and a nod, to imply that she was to agree to this.

"Yes, oh yes, that's all," said Valetta timidly.

"And if you, my dear Blanche, feel equal to going up to our dear friend, and keeping her company, I'm sure Miss Bell does not want to forestall you. Only it is certain that one or the other of you must go at once. I am very anxious about the effect upon her of all this disturbance, and I don't want her to be left alone."

Valetta waited while Mrs. Skates drank the sherry which her husband offered her, and looked rather puzzled as to what she ought to do. But the moment she again turned towards the door Mrs. Skates jumped up once more, with almost a scream, and a scared look at the Doctor, and saying: "I'm perfectly well now; I'm going now," hurried past her and up the stairs.

Valetta, angry with both husband and wife, though she scarcely knew why, except that their conduct was a trifle puzzling, would not listen to the Doctor's offer of the morning papers, but went slowly up to her own room, and sat down to wonder what was going to happen.

Certainly Mrs. Skates had always been jealous of her influence, such as it was, with Miss Farebrother; but she had never shown it quite so clearly as this morning, when, strangely enough, Miss Farebrother was in the mood to be very

dissatisfied with her young companion. Why was Mrs. Skates so extremely anxious to keep the girl, whom she looked upon as a rival, out of her employer's rooms? Valetta felt curiosity only, not resentment, as she much preferred to be free from the exacting humors of Miss Farebrother when she was in an ill-temper, as she certainly was this morning. But, on the other hand, the girl was anxious not to appear to shirk her duty, and she was therefore divided between the wish to go to the boudoir, and the wish to stay away from it. And while she waited, and hesitated what to do, the bell in Miss Farebrother's room rang out with a long, persistent tinkle.

Valetta ran to the door, but Mrs. Skates, who instantly appeared at it with a white, scared face, repulsed her sharply.

"I rang for Jarman. Send her to me," she said at once.

Valetta obeyed without delay, and retreated again to her own room, which was near at hand. There she waited for nearly an hour, when she was able to waylay Jarman, as the maid came out into the corridor with a grave face.

"What's the matter, Jarman?" asked the young girl, quickly.

The maid shook her head.

"Ah, the poor dear! The Doctor was quite right: he said last night's business would upset her. And sure enough it has! She's been that ill for the last hour I began to think we should lose her, I did indeed."

"You've sent for a doctor, of course?"

"No, madam. She won't hear of it. It's some fad of Dr. Skates and his wife, you know, to do without doctors; faith-healing, or some such rubbish they call it; and so we've got her through as best we could. But she was sick, and in great pain, and Mrs. Skates, for all she sets up for a good sick-nurse, was as nervous and useless as possible. I'd a great mind to call you in; for all you're so young and inexperienced, you'd have been a lot more use than she was."

Valetta listened with the deepest gravity, and said nothing at all in answer. It was not until she had drawn Jarman into her own room and shut the door that she said, as if casually:

"What began the illness, do you know?"

"I can't think, madam. Unless it was indigestion. That's what she put it down to herself, eating several things she isn't used to last night at the supper. She says she felt unwell quite early this morning, and that she would have done better not to take her beef-tea as usual at eleven."

"But she always has that!"

"Yes. But she thinks it was too heavy for her to-day."

Valetta expressed surprise, but Jarman was too much disturbed and grieved to have any definite idea on the subject.

"Has she asked for me? Do you think I might go in?"

"I'll ask her."

Jarman went back into the bedroom, and while she was gone, Valetta heard the Doctor's

step on the stairs, and started a little when he came up to her, asking what that loud ringing at the bell was for.

Valetta looked up at him.

"Did you hear it?" she said quietly. "It was Miss Farebrother's bell. She was taken ill, seriously ill."

"Dear, dear; you don't mean that!" cried he, anxiously.

"Yes; Jarman will tell you about it. Don't you think we ought to send for a doctor?"

"Certainly, if she wishes to see one," said he, readily. "I'll find out if she does, and go for one myself if necessary."

At this point Gaspard, who was passing downstairs when he heard a few of these words, came up and asked what was the matter.

"What is that about sending for a doctor?" he said.

Valetta turned to him at once.

"Your aunt's been taken very ill, with violent pain and sickness, Mr. Gaspard," said she quickly. "Don't you think a doctor ought to be sent for, whether she wishes it or not?"

"Indeed I do, and I insist upon it too. I'll go at once for Dr. Preston, who used to attend us in the old days."

And before Dr. Skates, who was frowning angrily at the brusque manner in which the young man had ignored him during this short colloquy, could put in a word, Gaspard ran downstairs and out of the house.

CHAPTER XX

"Really, the manners of these nephews of Miss Farebrother's leave room for improvement," said the Doctor, as he heard the door slam behind the young man.

"He was not very polite, certainly," said Valetta. "But I suppose we must make allowance for his anxiety about his aunt."

"But I'm quite as anxious about her as he can be. I don't, however, think it necessary to insult everybody I meet on that account."

They were in the middle of the corridor, not many steps from the door of Miss Farebrother's bedroom. As the Doctor finished speaking, the door opened a little way, and Mrs. Skates looked out, and beckoned to her husband.

Valetta took advantage of this diversion to run quickly to the door of the dressing-room which, however, she found locked. So she knocked at it sharply, in the hope that Jarman would hear and come to her.

In the meantime, as she waited, she saw by the faces of the Doctor and his wife, though their whispered words were uttered too low for her to hear, that they were in earnest conversation. Mrs. Skates had just drawn her husband's attention to Valetta, when the key of the dressing-room door was turned from within, and Jarman, putting her hand out quickly, drew the young

companion inside before Mrs. Skates could interfere to prevent her entrance.

"There!" whispered the maid triumphantly, "I've got you in. That Mrs. Skates didn't want me to, said you were too young and persuaded Miss Farebrother to agree with her. But now you're in I expect you'll be allowed to stay. Come in, quick, and keep quiet. And it will be all right."

She led Valetta, even while she spoke, to the door of the bedroom, and gently pushed her in. Miss Farebrother was lying in bed, with her eyes closed, looking so pale and worn that the girl was frightened. Surely, she thought, this was the approach of death. She did not attempt to speak, but slid quietly into a chair by the fire, to be ready in case she should be wanted.

She had scarcely done so when Mrs. Skates came back into the room, and started with an exclamation at the sight of her. To Valetta's surprise, she did not even lower her voice as she asked sharply :—

"Who told you to come in here?"

"S—h!" said the Doctor from outside the door, which his wife had left ajar.

But the warning came rather late. With a start, Miss Farebrother had already opened her eyes, and she now said querulously, "What is it! What's the matter? Can't you be quiet, Blanche?"

Valetta saw the Doctor's finger inserted through the doorway, beckoning to his wife, who went sullenly across to him, and again exchanged a

whisper with him. In the meantime Miss Farebrother saw Valetta, and faintly smiled at her. The girl got up and approached the bed, and the old lady feebly put out her hand to take hers. The movement, however, had not escaped the lynx eyes of Mrs. Skates, who turned from the door to say:

"Miss Bell, I think it's very unwise of you to intrude here just now. So many people about her will disturb the dear lady. Two at a time are quite enough."

She spoke with the extreme irritability which had characterized her every utterance since the previous evening; and it was plain, even as she said these words, that the tones of her voice grated upon the invalid. It came, however, like a bombshell upon the whole party when Miss Farebrother suddenly found voice to say:

"You're right, Blanche. Let me have only two at a time. Leave me with Miss Bell and Jarman, and go away and rest yourself."

Mrs. Skates, confounded by this ukase, protested, stammered; but it was of no use. Miss Farebrother could be very autocratic when she pleased, and nothing would move her now. With a wave of the hand she signified this, and Mrs. Skates, with a look at Valetta, which can best be described as venomous, went slowly towards the door.

The Doctor outside, who must have heard every word of this, now spoke in the most persuasive of voices:

"It's very kind of Miss Farebrother, my dear

Blanche, and she's quite right, quite right. You'll be ill yourself if you don't take some repose. My dear Miss Farebrother," he went on through the door, in tones of deep solicitude, "let me take this opportunity of telling you how grieved we all are at your illness. Your nephews insist that you must see a doctor. Gaspard, in particular, says he will not allow you to refuse."

It may be that the Doctor expected the answer he got to this speech: at any rate, there was a slight smile on his face as the old lady called out, feebly indeed as to voice, but with unmistakable firmness of purpose:

"I won't see him! I won't see any doctor. Tell my nephews I intend to die peacefully, when I do die, and without any help from their friends."

Valetta heard these words, and pondered them carefully. It occurred to her to wonder whether Dr. Skates was anxious that no medical man should attend the invalid. She was a shrewd little person, this Dresden china shepherdess with the big eyes, and no casual observer would have guessed at the thoughts which began to spin in her pretty head as she sat down quietly beside the bed and looked demurely at the carpet.

The Doctor's voice, meanwhile, was speaking again in the most soothing tones:

"Oh dear, oh dear, you can't expect me to make mischief by saying such a thing as that, my dear lady! I daren't give them such a message. I really daren't. You must send it, if you insist, by some one more courageous than I."

By this time Mrs. Skates had left the room,

and the Doctor, with a few more kindly words, shut the door softly and went away also.

For two hours or more Miss Farebrother lay with her eyes closed, except when Jarman announced that Dr. Preston had come, when the wilful old lady gave her one look and sent her away with the curt message that she was much obliged to her nephews for their solicitude, but she did not want a doctor, as she was not ill.

At the end of the two hours, however, she sat up a little and answered Jarman's inquiry as to whether she would like anything to eat or drink, with an assent.

"A little chicken broth, madam, or arrow-root?" asked the maid.

"Oh, whichever you like," answered Miss Farebrother; "only be careful how it's made."

"Oh, yes, madam. Mrs. Skates told me to make whatever you had myself, so I've got a fire in the dressing-room."

"That's right. I'm sure it was that beef-tea that made me ill," said Miss Farebrother, as she closed her eyes again.

The day wore away very quietly, and Miss Farebrother made no further complaint of pain or uneasiness.

Jarman and the young companion remained in the three rooms which composed the old lady's suite, and nobody else came into the bedroom. Towards the end of the afternoon, however, Valetta thought she heard a slight sound of footsteps in the dressing-room, and going softly across the floor, she peeped in, and saw Dr. Skates as he went

quietly and quickly out by the door into the corridor.

Miss Bell said nothing to anybody about what she had seen, but she went back on tiptoe into the bedroom, and sitting down by the fire, appeared to be considering deeply. Then she went up to the door which led out direct into the corridor, and turned the key in the lock. Miss Farebrother was dozing and did not hear her, but Jarman stared at her in amazement.

Valetta beckoned the maid into the next room, and putting her hand on her arm, said earnestly :

"Jarman, you don't think me silly just because I'm young, do you?"

"Why no, madam, I don't think you silly at all. I'm sure you're very clever," said the maid with conviction.

"And you know, don't you, that it's a very responsible thing, for you and me to have to nurse Miss Farebrother without a doctor?"

"Yes, I do indeed," said poor Jarman, with a melancholy face.

"Because, if anything were to happen to her," (Jarman started violently) "people might say it was your fault or mine, mightn't they?"

"I'm sure, I wish I had nothing to do with it!" moaned poor Jarman much alarmed by this suggestion.

The young girl seized her bony arm in a firm grip.

"Well, listen to me. I know something of sick nursing, really, and I'm ready to take the whole responsibility upon myself, upon one con-

dition, and that is, that you'll do exactly whatever I tell you, and that you'll say nothing whatever about what we're doing except just what I say. Just what I say you must say, mind, even if it surprises you very much."

It was not to be wondered at that poor Jarman hesitated before pledging herself to such an extraordinary course of action. But Valetta drew up her little figure, and said imperiously:

"If you won't agree, I'll go to my own room, and I won't come back here again. I'll leave you and Mrs. Skates to manage between you."

But at that Jarman gave way.

"Oh, no, anything but that, madam," she said earnestly. "Mrs. Skates means well, no doubt. But she is, if I may say so, such a muddler, and she fusses so dreadfully, that I wouldn't really answer for the consequences if she were to keep on fidgeting about here as she's been doing this morning. And she looks so woebegone for another thing that it's enough to make one ill to look at her!"

"Very well then, that's settled," said Valetta. "Now, to begin with, you're to keep the door of this room locked, and the door of the dressing-room unlocked—the doors leading into the corridor, I mean."

"But if there's a door left unlocked, Mrs. Skates is sure to come fussing."

"Do as I tell you," interrupted Valetta. "And in the next place, you are to keep a fire going in both rooms, and you are to go on making Miss

Farebrother's beef-tea and arrowroot, and toast and tea, and whatever she wants, in the next room. We had better not have anything brought from downstairs."

"Very well. But—"

"And in the next place I want you to bring me up one or two things I want for myself in here. Go to the housekeeper, and ask her to give you them direct from the store-room; be particular about that, and bring them straight to me. I'll give you a list."

Jarman would have made objections to the novelty of this procedure, but Valetta was headstrong, and would not listen to reason. Unless she had her own way in every respect, she said, she would have nothing to do with the case. So old Jarman, though much puzzled and rather disturbed by these novel methods, eventually sank into placid obedience, and did the bidding of the Dresden shepherdess implicitly.

She presently suggested, however, that Valetta should go downstairs and give Michael the interview he wanted. Valetta, after considering for a moment, shook her head.

"I think," she said, slowly, "I had better give all my thoughts to Miss Farebrother. Just tell Mr. Michael, please, that I'm glad he's getting on all right, and that I hope he'll keep as quiet as he can."

It was some few hours later than this that Dr. Skates tapped softly at the door of Miss Farebrother's room. Valetta went swiftly, but silently,

to the door, unlocked it, and went out into the corridor, shutting the door behind her, and wearing a very grave face.

"How is our dear friend going on?" asked the Doctor anxiously.

Valetta looked up with a piteous expression.

"She is very far from well, Doctor, I'm sorry to say," she said, sorrowfully.

"She's not had any more of those attacks, I trust?" pursued the Doctor.

"Only after what we give her to eat and drink, Doctor. But then she has pain and sickness. Don't you think it would be wiser, in the circumstances, to send for a doctor?"

Dr. Skates affected to consider.

"If she were not in the best possible hands, my dear Miss Bell," he said, "I should agree with you that it would be better even to disregard her own injunctions, and to send for one. But as it is, unless she herself insists that one should be sent for——"

"No, she doesn't do that. She hasn't asked for a doctor once," said Valetta.

"Then, in that case," said the Doctor decidedly, "I think we can hardly take upon ourselves to disregard her wishes."

"Very well, I suppose you know best," said Valetta submissively. "But you're putting a very great responsibility on me. You see now I am in sole charge, and everything she takes passes through my hands. Don't you see, therefore, how dreadful it would be if—if anything went wrong?"

The Doctor nodded his head two or three times reassuringly.

"You're a brave girl, and you're doing your best. We all know that, and we should all stand by you, whatever happened. We are in the hands of Providence. I can say no more."

He went away, and Valetta, with a brighter face, turned back into the bedroom, and re-locked the door. It was evident that Dr. Skates was wholly satisfied with her efficiency in the care of the invalid, for he did not allow his wife to return to the sick-room.

Every few hours, however, he came himself to the door, and although Valetta had only the same melancholy news to give him regarding Miss Farebrother's condition, he still trusted her so completely that, to each suggestion she made that a doctor should be sent for, he gave the same reply that he thought they had better respect the invalid's wishes.

In the meantime, however, these disquieting reports from the sick-room reached the ears of Gaspard, and through him of Michael; but to all the messages of the young men requesting to see Valetta for a few moments she sent the reply that she could not leave Miss Farebrother in the condition she was in, but that the best that was possible was being done for her.

The brothers, in spite of the objections of the nurse in charge of Michael, had a consultation that night.

"That girl's a fool after all," said Gaspard, irritably. "Fancy her playing into the hands of

old Skates like this, by agreeing not to let Preston see her! It seems to me, from what one hears, that our aunt's dying. Now, what will be said of us all if she does die, without a qualified medical man having seen her?"

Michael did not take quite the same view.

"Dr. Preston told me this morning," said he, "that it was possible, if my aunt had resolutely set her face against seeing him, that a visit from him would only make her worse. Besides, I don't agree with you that Miss Bell's a fool. I think she's a very clever girl, and as good as she's pretty. If she thought it would save my aunt's life, I am certain she would be the first to insist on a doctor's coming. But if, as I begin to fear, she sees that our aunt's dying, she may think, as Dr. Preston himself did, that to excite and worry her at such a time would be only cruelty."

"Very well," said Gaspard, dismally. "She will probably be dead to-morrow, and Dr. Skates will be a rich man, and you and I willbe paupers."

Michael looked thoughtful. At last he said:—

"I tell you what, Gaspard; you shall go up to Scotland Yard to-morrow, and just ask whether they've had any news from the man they sent down here. I'll manage to scribble a line to explain why you come instead of me, and perhaps you'll learn something."

Gaspard was very reluctant to take this active step, and wholly unhopeful as to its having any good result. He said they had been outwitted from the very beginning by the Doctor, and they would be outwitted to the end. As, however,

Michael persisted, and it was unwise to thwart him, the elder brother at length consented to take the place of the younger, and started for London the next morning, after having received from Valetta such a bulletin as made him certain that Miss Farebrother would be dead before he could return to the Abbey. To the suggestion, however, that his aunt should see him for a few minutes, the young companion refused to listen.

"She is very ill, and I've taken the sole responsibility of nursing her upon myself, and she can't see anybody," was Valetta's parrot cry.

So, unsatisfied, and in the lowest possible spirits, Gaspard went up to Scotland Yard, where he was received by the official who had seen his brother, and noticed in his manner a marked coldness.

Yes, news had been received from Watkin, the officer in charge of the case, and this news, as far as it went, was entirely satisfactory.

"You mean," asked Gaspard, rather puzzled by the coolness with which he was treated, "that you have identified this Dr. Skates as a man named Anderson."

The official looked at him narrowly, and after a moment's pause, said:—

"I am really not in a position to say more at present, sir. We have heard from Watkin, but not yet fully, and we are to hear again. After that we will communicate with you and your brother."

Gaspard understood that the short interview was at an end, and he got up to go, a good deal

nettled by his reception. At the door, however, he turned to say :—

"By the by, can you tell me if you have ever had any dealings with a man named Anderson? Was he a criminal?"

"There was a man named James Anderson who was strongly suspected of a crime committed near Bournemouth some time ago," said the official. "But it could not be brought home to him."

"May I ask what the crime was?" asked Gaspard.

"Well, it was poisoning." Gaspard started. "He was suspected of having administered colchicum to an old lady, after having induced her to make a will in his favor."

Gaspard gave a great shout.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "Then he's at the same game again. He's poisoning my aunt!"

CHAPTER XXI

When Gaspard reached St. Mary's-on-Sea that afternoon, on his return from town, he almost ran into the arms of Madeline Chalmers, who was at the bookstall buying a magazine for the Vicar.

She was shocked and amazed by the extreme pallor of his face and the wild look in his eyes.

"What has happened? Is your brother worse? Or Miss Farebrother?" asked she quickly.

Gaspard could scarcely speak.

"Will you go back to the Abbey with me?" implored he, after a moment's pause. "There's

no time to be lost. It may be a question of life and death for my aunt!"

"What?"

"That rascally Skates is trying to murder her, and has probably succeeded by this time," gasped the young man, as Madeline, at once agreeing to his suggestion, kept pace with his rapid steps. "Unluckily, he's been artful enough to gain over my aunt's companion to his own views——"

"Miss Bell! Oh, no, it's not possible!"

"Of course, she doesn't know what he's doing," went on Gaspard quickly. "I didn't myself till a couple of hours ago. It seems this scoundrel has been at this game before, tried to poison an old lady at Bournemouth——"

"Oh, are you sure? Are you sure?"

"Yes; I've just come from Scotland Yard. There, for some reason I can't understand, they made rather light of what I told them."

"Perhaps," suggested Madeline, "he's forestalled you with them, as he did with Mr. Buckle."

The suggestion was so startling, and, by the light of what he knew of Skates, so probable, that Gaspard stopped short to exclaim below his breath: "By Jove!"

Then he hurried on again, clenching his fists and his teeth in impotent rage.

"Oh, don't despair," urged Madeline timidly, for indeed she could not feel very hopeful in face of the mountain of fraud and intrigue which rose up before them. "Everything may come right, after all. Don't you think there must be a limit even to the audacity of these people, and that——"

"It won't be reached till they've murdered my aunt, and perhaps Michael too," said Gaspard. "Skates hates him more than he does me, because he's got more spirit than I have, and more pluck, and because he's taken more active measures than I have."

"But his active measures haven't been any more successful than your passive ones."

"He hates him for it, though, and he'll never rest till he's had his revenge upon the poor lad. I gave particular directions to the nurses that they were not to leave him alone on any pretence."

"And what is it you want me to do?" asked Madeline, who was panting from the pace at which they were walking.

"I want you to persuade Miss Bell to send for a doctor at once."

"But surely you're the person to do that!"

"I've tried. I sent Dr. Preston to her yesterday, and my aunt wouldn't see him. But this girl has influence with her, and if she chose, she could have a doctor in, and persuade my aunt to see him. That's what I want you to do."

Madeline agreed at once, though with many misgivings as to her powers of persuasion. The fact was that the situation at the Abbey had by this time grown so serious that it had caused a general feeling of consternation among those of the neighbors who knew anything about it. The boldly-made accusations of Miss Farebrother's two nephews against the popular Dr. Skates and his wife, followed by the rather mysterious accident to Michael, and now by the reports of the danger-

ous illness of Miss Farebrother herself, had increased this feeling to something like panic; and nothing was now talked of by the neighbors but the course of affairs at the big house.

There were two sides taken in the matter, of course; and Dr. Skates, with his genial manners, had made so much better a general impression than the two now somewhat reserved and low-spirited young men that, on the whole, there were more sympathizers with him than with them among their acquaintances.

Madeline knew this, and the knowledge that these unlucky friends of her childhood were threatened with absolute ruin, without the power to make an attempt to escape it, filled her with so much distress that by the time she and Gaspard stood under the glass shelter which led from the gate to the house-door, the tears were gathering in her eyes. It was light enough still for Gaspard to see this as he turned to speak again to her. The sight made his own eyes moist, as he held out his hand to her.

"Thank you," said he, in a husky voice. "It does one good to know that there's a kind feeling for one anywhere, and especially——"

"Don't," whispered she back. "Don't, oh, don't! I'll do whatever I can, and if it's of no use, at any rate, I'll—I'll——"

Her lips moved, but her voice had gone. But she gave him such a look, so full of tender sympathy and goodness, that he caught her in his arms, and kissed her passionately on the lips.

Then, both very white, and tremulous, and

slightly indistinct as to speech in the passionate anxiety and excitement which possessed them, they were admitted by the man-servant, who told them, in answer to his questions, that there was no change to report in Miss Farebrother's condition. She was very ill, and had seen nobody but Jarman and Miss Bell, who would allow no one else to enter the sick-room.

"I'll go upstairs, and ask if she'll see you," whispered Gaspard to Madeline, who thereupon followed the servant to the drawing-room, while Gaspard went up to interview the inexorable companion.

"Where is she?" asked Valetta, who was beginning to look very wan, as a result of her long vigil.

"In the drawing-room, with the Skateses."

"Then I'll go down to her," said Valetta, as she turned back to give some instructions to Jarman before leaving the room.

She went downstairs with him without saying another word, and only answered by a shake of the head the question he put as to his aunt's condition.

When she entered the drawing-room, however, the firmness of her look and carriage for a moment left her, and she staggered slightly as she advanced into the big square room, which looked strangely unlike itself now that Miss Farebrother, in her favorite low armchair, no longer occupied her usual corner by the fire.

Mrs. Skates now sat there, wrapped in a shawl

and shivering, though the May afternoon was by no means particularly cold.

The Doctor stood on the hearthrug, his feet planted wide apart, his face as ruddy as ever, but his features composed to a look of respectful sympathy with the distress in which the household was plunged.

He at once prepared a chair for Valetta, who sank into it quickly, saying, "Thank you," in an almost inaudible voice.

For some reason, she seemed at first scarcely able to look up, and when Madeline held out her hand she took it in a hurried, nervous way, while the blood suddenly rushed to her cheeks.

"You look overwrought, my dear young lady," said the Doctor, kindly. "Let me give you a cup of tea."

He prepared it with his own hands, but Valetta would not drink it. She had had her tea up stairs, she said. Madeline had taken the chair by her side, but felt rather nervous about addressing her, so plain was it to all eyes that the slight, girlish-looking creature had been suffering from a severe strain.

The questions had to come at last, however, and it was the Doctor who asked the first:

"And how did you leave our dear invalid, Miss Bell?" he asked, in his deep-toned, genial voice, just the voice to express sympathy in the most eloquent possible way.

"Just the same—as she's been all day to-day—and yesterday, too," answered Valetta, her

voice gaining a little in strength and firmness as she went on.

"No worse, eh?"

There was a pause.

Then Valetta said, very clearly: "I shouldn't like to say that she's no worse."

Another pause, broken only by the Doctor's muttered: "Dear, dear!"

Then he said, aloud: "You don't think she's sinking, do you?"

"I really couldn't say even that," said Valetta.

There was a low hush of consternation. Mrs. Skates began to move restlessly in her chair.

"Won't she take nourishment?" asked the Doctor.

"She takes what I give her," said Valetta.

And as she uttered these words every one could see that the girl grew red and white.

"And yet she gets no better?"

"No better," said Valetta. "It seems as if there were something to irritate and make her ill in everything given her to eat or drink."

Gaspard and Madeline uttered each an exclamation.

Then Madeline spoke, shyly, but earnestly:—

"But isn't it very alarming when she gets as weak as that?"

"Very. I am much alarmed," said Valetta, and as she spoke her voice trembled.

Mrs. Skates said not a word but watched her very intently throughout the whole of the conversation.

"Surely," suggested Madeline, meekly, "it would be better to let her see a doctor, wouldn't it?"

"Is she," asked the Doctor, anxiously, "in such a state that a doctor could do her no good?"

"I'm sure of it," said Valetta, with sudden boldness.

There was a short silence of utter consternation real or affected, on the part of all but Mrs. Skates, who still sat regarding the companion with a fixed, curious, and entirely inimical stare.

Madeline stood up.

"I hope you won't think it impertinent of me to say so," she said, "but I do think you ought to send for Dr. Preston, and see if he couldn't give her something to stop these dreadful symptoms."

"I think so, too," said Valetta, simply.

"You don't think," said Dr. Skates gravely, "that she would be in a fit state to know who he was, and, therefore, you feel sure that it would no longer disturb her to find her wishes disregarded."

"I'll take the responsibility of that," said Valetta as gravely as he.

Mrs. Skates sat upright.

"I call it wicked," she said, vehemently, "to disregard the express wishes of a dying woman!"

"Dying!" cried Madeline and Gaspard at the same moment.

"Didn't you say, Miss Bell, that you believed she was dying?" said Mrs. Skates as emphatically as before.

"I shouldn't like to say that," answered Valetta, in a low and tremulous voice.

Then the Doctor spoke, interposing between the two ladies with one of his gracious waves of the hand that seemed to settle things.

"I think," said he, "since Miss Bell takes upon herself the responsibility of calling him in, that we can do nothing but assist her in the matter."

"Thank you," said Valetta.

"I really can't see that it would be of any use," protested Mrs. Skates again.

The Doctor turned to her sharply.

"My dear Blanche," said he, "we have no voice in the matter, none whatever. Miss Bell, who has taken upon herself the nursing of our dear friend, must know best what to do. Though, if the sickness has gone on all this time, two whole days," and he turned again with a solemn face to Valetta, "I'm afraid there is very little hope. You are sure," he went on impressively, while the eyes of all in the room rested intently on his face, so solemn was he, "that she cannot possibly have got anything to eat or to drink which had not passed through your hands?"

"Absolutely sure," said Valetta.

"And, of course, every care was taken in the preparation of everything that was given her?"

"Every care," answered Valetta, earnestly. "More than that, I can answer for it that nothing that was not absolutely wholesome and good has passed her lips."

"No possibility, of course, of anybody having

tampered with anything?" asked Gaspard, suddenly.

The question caused a certain uneasiness in two of the ladies present. But Valetta turned to him at once, now as self-possessed as at the beginning of the conversation she had been timid, and answered,—

"There was absolutely no fear of that. I'll answer for it."

The Doctor nodded his head, perfectly satisfied. But still Mrs. Skates kept her eyes fixed, suspiciously, upon the young girl's face.

"Then," said Dr. Skates, "since you can answer for so much, you are the person, Miss Bell, to decide whether the doctor is to come. So much is absolutely clear."

"Yes," said Valetta. And at once she said to Gaspard: "If you will ask Dr. Preston to come, I'll persuade Miss Farebrother, if any persuasion is necessary, to see him."

Gaspard went quickly to the door. At the same time Madeline rose. As she shook hands with Valetta, she noticed how very cold the girl's hands were. She would not shake hands with either of the Skateses, but gave a hurried bow to them as Valetta rose and accompanied her to the door.

"How cold you are!" cried she, as they reached the passage outside, on the way to the hall.

"Yes," replied Valetta, with a shiver, "whenever my head gets hot, my hands and feet get quite cold. It's an anxious time, you know."

The two girls looked in each other's face, and their hearts went out in instinctive sympathy. Then Madeline asked :

"And Michael, how is he ?"

A look of pain contracted the pretty features of the young companion.

"They tell me he's going on all right," she said ; "but I haven't dared to see him. I think, if I did," she went on, quickly, "I should break down altogether ; and I can't afford the time to break down just now."

Madeline put out her hand to her again.

"That's right, that's right," she whispered. "You are brave, you are splendid. I've the greatest hopes that you'll do something for those poor boys yet."

But Valetta only put her finger on her lip, and said :

"Good-by, Miss Chalmers. Give my kind regards to the Vicar, won't you, and to Mrs. Chalmers ?"

And then Madeline went away, and Valetta ran up-stairs.

Gaspard soon came back, but he had been unlucky. The doctor was out, so that he could only leave a message asking him to come round to the Abbey as soon as he could. In the meantime the young man hastened to see his brother, who was anxiously awaiting his return.

Michael at once agreed that Madeline had hit the right nail on the head in supposing that Skates had been communicating with Scotland Yard. But here Gaspard saw a difficulty.

"How about the detective down here?" said he. "You heard him call out 'Anderson!' so there can be no doubt he recognized him. Surely he would have sent such a piece of news to headquarters at once!"

This did seem the most likely thing to have happened, and Michael was puzzled how to account for the ignorance on this point shown by the official they had both seen.

"One thing is certain," said he, "and that is that you must find out what has become of Watkin, the detective who was sent down here. Inquire among the servants as to the time and place where he was last seen, and then find out, if you can, where he meant to pass the night. I suppose he had taken some lodging. If the servants don't know it, make inquiries in the village."

"All right," said Gaspard. "It'll do in the morning, won't it?"

"No," answered Michael, quickly, "you must see about it now. I want to see the man to-night, at once."

So Gaspard went to the servants' hall, and made diligent inquiries, according to his brother's instructions. But all in vain. Nobody knew where the odd man had meant to stay, nor why he had thrown up his work, without, as it turned out, even applying for his pay for what he had done on the first day.

"I think, sir, if I may make so bold," said one of the gardeners, coming forward to address Gaspard, "as there was something a bit wrong with that chap. He was all for prying, it seemed to

me. I took it into my head he was more interested in the dancing of the little ladies and gentlemen in the drawing-room than hard on his work. Why, he was polishing the windows up to past nine o'clock at night, and as I said to him, it was more from curiosity than love of his work that was."

"And what did he say to that?" asked Gaspard.

"Why, sir, he said—and he winked at me as he said it—as he liked to see the fun, and didn't mean to give up polishing the winders not as long as the dancing went on, sir!"

"Oh," said Gaspard, "then he must have been about pretty late?"

"Ay, that he was, sir. Why, he was there, as I say, up to nine."

"And when and where did you see him last?

"It was just before nine, sir, while the magic lantern show was goin' on, that I see him last. He was hangin' about the hall where the entertainment was goin' on."

"And then you lost sight of him?"

"Yes, sir. I saw nothing of him after that."

"Did any of you see him later than that?" asked Gaspard, now no longer hiding the fact that he considered these inquiries of deep moment.

There was a silence. Then followed a slight whispering in the ranks of the younger servants, and a girl of about sixteen was pushed forward by her companions, protesting shyly, and trying to escape observation.

"If you please, sir, Susan heard something," said one of others.

"Well," said Gaspard kindly to the girl, who was crimson and inclined to be tearful. "And what was it you heard? Don't be afraid of speaking out."

"It was nothing, sir——"

"Oh, Susan, you said you heard a noise and saw two men who seemed to be fighting," said the older woman.

It needed a great deal of persuasion to get the poor frightened girl to tell what she had heard, and then it seemed at first as if it did not amount to much.

She had gone up to the second floor on the night of the party, and had heard a noise which she described as a "sort of cry," and looking out of the window she had dimly seen under the trees, something going on which she thought to be a scuffle between two men.

Almost as soon as she got to the window, however, the disturbance was over, and she saw nothing more, and heard nothing for some minutes, when a sound like the beating of hands upon wood was followed by the soft opening and shutting of a door, which she thought must be that which led into the house, under the back staircase.

"Did you tell any one what you had seen and heard?" asked Gaspard kindly.

"No, sir, not then."

"Why didn't you?"

After a little hesitating and stammering the girl was understood to say she did not think anything of it until she heard next day of the accident to Mr. Michael. Then she did tell a fellow-servant,

who spoke to one of the gardeners, who advised her not to chatter about it.

Gaspard tried in vain to discover from the girl at what time it was that she heard the noise and saw the scuffle going on. She either would not or could not fix the hour within practicable limits. The surprising fact remained that it had evidently taken place before the household retired to rest, if the girl's account was to be trusted.

Gaspard's next move was to go to the cottage of the head gardener at the other end of the grounds, and to ask if he knew anything.

All he could say was that he had missed a spade from the tool-house and that he had been amazed to find the long hole in the ground into which Mr. Michael had fallen. He had no idea who could have made it, nor for what purpose, and all the inquiries he had made among the men under him had failed to elicit any satisfactory response.

As for the "odd man," who had disappeared so quickly, the gardener was inclined to believe that he had stolen the spade, and got away with it, and perhaps with other things that had not yet been missed. And the gardener was evidently not sorry to make this suggestion, as Miss Farebrother's encouragement of casual helpers was highly distasteful to the servants in regular employment at the Abbey.

"I should like you," said Gaspard, when he had listened attentively to all the man had to say, "to make a careful inspection of the grounds with

me now, to see if we can find any trace of this man."

The gardener looked surprised.

"What trace of him could we find, sir?" he asked with a touch of surliness.

"If," pursued Gaspard, stubbornly, "the hole was made, as you all seem inclined to think, by this stranger with the intention of hiding stolen things in it, and if he was frightened away by my brother's coming out to see what was going on, we shall surely be able to find, somewhere about, some articles which he had stolen and prepared to hide."

"Of course, I'll come with you if you like, sir," said the man, unwillingly enough.

The fact was that the notion which had seized Valetta, when she saw the hole by daylight, that it was like a grave, had entered the heads of all the servants about the place also, and had filled them with a sort of superstitious terror, under the influence of which some were even inclined to think that it had been dug by supernatural hands, and that it betokened an early death in the household.

This idea having been strengthened by the severe accident to Michael, and the dangerous illness of his aunt, the spot where the hole had been dug was carefully avoided by everyone, when it had been hastily filled in by the order of Gaspard.

Now, therefore, that the head-gardener found himself compelled to go, in the uncertain and dim twilight of a May evening, on a search expedition

in the neighborhood of the uncanny spot, even his robust, middle-aged common sense was hardly proof against a sensation akin to that of a sudden douche of cold water down the spine.

He took his lantern with him, although it was not yet dark, and he and the young master walked very silently, looking about them on both sides, until they came within a few yards of the stack of underwood.

Then Gaspard said suddenly :

"It was here that the man was working that day, wasn't it?"

"In the afternoon, sir, yes."

"And it was near here the hole was made?"

"Ye-es."

The man answered in a thick whisper, and Gaspard turned to him.

"What's the matter, Miller?"

But the gardener did not answer. Holding his lantern a little way up, he was staring with all his eyes at the ground close to the woodstack. Gaspard's eyes followed his, without another word being spoken by either of them.

Twilight was falling fast under the big trees, and an eerie dimness lay over the ground and in the dark spaces between hedge and brush, shrub and tree-trunk. The evening mist struck chill and damp, but it was not with cold that both men shivered, as they looked before them, staring intently, fixed and motionless, and without exchanging so much as a word or a glance.

Yet it was their own fancy rather than anything more certain which held them in the grip of a

deadly terror. For what was it they saw? Something dark, indistinct, shapeless, half-hidden under a pile of brushwood, guessed at rather than clearly seen.

"What's that, Miller, under—under— There —there?"

His words died away, and the gardener went forward without answering him.

He pulled the uppermost twigs down, and stopped.

Then he turned to the young master, with an awestruck face.

"Ay, sir, that's—that's him, sure enough!" whispered he.

After one short pause, during which they scarcely dared to look at each other, they tore the heaped-up wood away, and pulled the pile to pieces, exposing at last, as they expected, as they knew, the huddled-up body of the missing man.

They looked at him, and then again at each other.

"Murdered, sir," said the gardener, huskily. "Look at his head."

By the dim light of the lantern they saw a piteous sight. The head of the unfortunate man had been battered in, one side smashed, beaten to an indescribable, sickening horror. There, where he lay, a huddled heap, the horrible injuries had apparently been inflicted, and the murderer had covered the body with wood from the pile, deliberately, cleverly, so that the heap which lay on the dead man seemed but such part of the stack as had been prepared for immediate use.

"The police!" whispered Gaspard, "we must send for them."

He would have kept the awful news from the household for a little, if he had been able to do so. But even before he reached the house, a whisper from the gardener, on his way to the police-station, had spread like lightning from lip to lip, so that when the young man entered the hall, he found himself at once confronted, not only by Dr. and Mrs. Skates, but by Valetta, who, standing on the bottom stair, with her hand upon the banisters, awaited his return in a state of the strongest excitement.

"What's this? What's this story of a man found dead in the grounds, Mr. Gaspard? Not true, I hope?" said the Doctor, earnestly.

Gaspard nodded sullenly, without raising his eyes.

"Who is it?"

"Is it some one who's known?" pursued Dr. Skates, seizing his arm, and insisting upon detaining the young man, who was shaking with sick terror.

"It's a man who was at work here two days ago, sir," explained a man-servant, who had entered the hall with the dreadful news.

The Doctor staggered back.

"Good Heavens?" cried he. "And when was he missed?"

"He's been missing since the night before last, sir."

"The night before last. Dear me! Why, that was the very night——" The Doctor affected to

pull himself up short, and turned quickly to Gaspard to say in a low voice: "You've done what you can to keep this quiet, of course?"

Gaspard looked up at him with a somber fire in his eyes.

"Keep it quiet!" he echoed, slowly. "Of course I've not. I've sent for the police already."

The Doctor started in ostentatious horror.

"Why, man alive!" cried he, forgetting to lower his voice in his amazement and consternation, "you're putting the rope round the neck of your own brother!"

Gaspard drew a long breath.

"Liar!" cried he, as he flew at the Doctor like an enraged lion.

CHAPTER XXII

Before Gaspard could touch the Doctor, however, and while Mrs. Skates was screaming and rushing madly at the two, a tiny figure, springing from they knew not where, suddenly stood between the two men, and Valetta, with a gesture astonishingly imperious for one so small, cried, not loudly, but in the tones of one who meant to be heard:

"Mr. Gaspard, listen to me."

He staggered, fell back a step. And Dr. Skates, who wore an air of perfect coolness, tried to disengage himself from the clinging arms of his wife.

Mrs. Skates, however, was apparently irritated by the appearance of the woman she disliked, and she was beginning to utter vague protests against her interference, when Valetta herself turned to her, and said:

"Mrs. Skates, you had better listen also. I've come from Dr. Preston."

The name caused a dead silence to follow immediately. The Skateses knew that the doctor had arrived, and that he had seen his patient, and they waited impatiently for his verdict upon her case.

"He is with Miss Farebrother now," Valetta went on, in a very grave tone of voice, "but, as I knew how anxious you all are to know what he thinks, I asked him if he would come down to the drawing-room before leaving, so that we may all hear what he has to say."

"Very kind, very thoughtful of you, Miss Bell," said the Doctor, heartily. "We all appreciate your kindness very much."

All but Mrs. Skates, perhaps. That lady now took no pains to disguise the ill-will she felt towards Miss Farebrother's companion, who had forestalled her in the office of sick-nurse, and who appeared besides to have inspired her with a hatred which could hardly be accounted for by that fact.

Gaspard, shaken already by the awful discovery he had made, as well as by the Doctor's accusation of Michael, scarcely seemed to understand the purport of Valetta's words. When Dr. Skates and his wife retreated to the drawing-

room, there to await the medical man, Gaspard stood still, with a white, wan face and dull eyes, as if he had lost the power of movement, and even that of thought.

All at once he felt a light touch on his arm.

"Come," said Valetta softly, "come too."

But he shook his head.

"I can't, I can't come," said he hoarsely, "and face that man, that scoundrel, after what he said! Did you hear him? He dared——"

"You had better come, for all that," said she, "and listen and watch quietly. Things have come to a crisis now, you know, and you must—may I say it?—must" (she whispered the next words) "keep your head."

Gaspard gave her a wan smile.

"It's about all I shall have left to keep within an hour or so, I think," said he.

"Well, you must bear up, for your poor brother's sake."

And the girl's voice shook a little on the words. Gaspard looked down at her quickly.

"You're right," said he. "When he's threatened with such a danger as that which that scoundrel holds over his head, we who love him have need of all our courage."

"And of all our craft," said she with a sagacious nod. "Now I won't ask you to go into the drawing-room to stay with the Skateses alone. But stay here till Dr. Preston comes down, and then go in with him. I can't come yet, because I have to fetch something to show the doctor."

"Have you seen him yet?" asked Gaspard.

"Not yet," said Valetta. "But I shall come into the drawing-room in time to hear what he's got to say."

Then she ran away, without giving him time to say anything more.

He waited in the hall, according to her suggestion, for there was an air of quiet authority about the little woman which impressed him with a sense that she had good reasons for her actions in the matter. When Dr. Preston came down a few minutes later, Gaspard noticed a gravity in his manner which portended, he thought, bad news. He was, however, too much dazed, and too ready to take the worst for granted, to ask him any questions, but just followed him and Valetta to the drawing-room, noting as he went that the girl was very white, and that she was trembling very much.

When they had all reached the drawing-room, and Gaspard had carefully shut the door, both Dr. Skates and his wife came up to the medical man with every appearance of intense anxiety.

Dr. Preston was cold, curt, and barely civil. He was not a polished man at any time, but to-night his manner was particularly brusque, and his words dropped from his lips with a peculiar dry emphasis which they all felt to be significant of some weighty matter on his mind.

When the first greetings were over, and he made them particularly short, there was a pause which was broken by Dr. Skates, who asked, in a voice of solemn gravity :

"Put us out of our suspense, doctor. Re-

member all we feel for the dear lady upstairs. Must we—must we—prepare for the worst?"

"Not at all, sir, not at all," said Dr. Preston, fixing him with a pair of steely eyes. "I have every hope that Miss Farebrother will be downstairs to-morrow and in her usual excellent health."

A sort of thrill of astonishment seemed to run through his hearers. Only Valetta Bell, standing with her hands firmly clasped a little way from the doctor, never looked up or moved a muscle. Perhaps an acute observer might have thought that Dr. Skates and Mrs. Skates were appalled rather than delighted at the news. Only for a moment, however. After a second's pause the genial Doctor, seizing the perhaps somewhat unwilling hand of Miss Farebrother's medical adviser, cried in ecstatic accents:

"Thank Heaven for that! Oh Blanche, my dear Blanche, what a weight off our hearts!" And he turned to his wife, who, instead of echoing his words and his grateful sentiments, was staring steadily at Valetta with wild eyes.

Dr. Preston disengaged his hand as soon as he could, and said:

"It's very unfortunate that I was not sent for in the first place, however, as, by what I understand from her maid, there were symptoms in the attack she had yesterday morning, which demanded careful, most careful inquiry."

"Indeed, Dr. Preston! To what did these symptoms point? Not to paralysis, or anything of that kind, I hope?"

It was again Dr. Skates who spoke. Dr. Preston turned to him.

"Oh, no, not to paralysis. They pointed to poisoning!"

"Poisoning! Surely not! She has been most carefully nursed. Miss Bell, who has undertaken the sole responsibility of the case from first to last, will answer to you for that."

Valetta, her face still very pale, but her manner perfectly calm, raised her head.

"Not quite from first to last, Dr. Skates," she said, in a measured tone. "You will remember that it was after the attack yesterday morning that I took Mrs. Skates's place with Miss. Farebrother."

"What does the woman mean by accusing me?" cried Mrs. Skates, rising suddenly and speaking with shrill, hysterical violence.

"I don't accuse you of anything," said Valetta, in the same even tone as before. "But Dr. Skates and Jarman and Mr. Gaspard will bear me out as to the fact."

"Certainly. That is so," said Dr. Skates, his voice dropping from its ringing, imperious tones to a sort of half-whisper.

"Ever since then, I know, I have been in sole command in the sick-room, and I prepared everything with my own hands that Miss Farebrother ate and drank."

"Did you, indeed?" murmured Dr. Skates politely.

"Yes," said Valetta. "I kept a fire going in her room on purpose." She turned to Dr. Pres-

ton. "You see, doctor, Jarman had been told by Mrs. Skates—"

"It's false! I told her nothing," almost shrieked that lady.

"She had been told," pursued Valetta, "to prepare everything for Miss Farebrother in the dressing-room. But while something was cooking in there I saw some one enter and leave the room, and so I took it into my head that, for fear of accidents, nothing that was prepared in that room should be given to Miss Farebrother." There was a deadly hush in the room as the girl went on: "But I allowed all the meals to be prepared in there just the same, though I did not let her touch them. And—" Here the girl paused a moment, to steady herself, and then went on in a suddenly louder tone: "As the first meal of yesterday had disagreed with her so badly, I have thought it best, Dr. Preston, to keep everything that was prepared in the dressing-room for you to see, or, if you think proper, to analyze."

Once more there ran a thrill through the room. Then in the deadly silence, Dr. Skates spoke again.

"Your cleverness and your care do you honor, Miss Bell. But I do think it is hard upon poor old Jarman that you should suspect her of playing tricks with your mistress's food!"

Valetta did not meet his eyes, but she smiled faintly. Gaspard would have spoken to her, but he was too much shaken with conflicting emotions to find words. Dr. Preston said:

"Let me have these things now, and I will take them with me to-night."

"No. Let me bring them round in the morning," suggested Dr. Skates.

"Thanks. I'll take them now."

Valetta was on her way to the door, when Mrs. Skates sprang across the room, and seizing her arm in a grip that caused the girl to cry out, hissed into her ear:

"You wicked mischief-maker. You'll pay for this!"

"My dear, my dear!" remonstrated Dr. Skates in the sweetest accents, as he disengaged the young girl, and let her go out of the room. "You are mistaken. She is actuated by the most admirable sense of duty. That, I am sure, will be her best reward."

But somehow the Doctor's suave tones sounded deadlier than his wife's stinging speeches.

CHAPTER XXIII

Valetta had scarcely left the drawing-room when a frightened servant came to the door to say that the police had come, and that they were in the grounds. The moment Gaspard heard this he followed the servant into the hall, without noticing Dr. Skates. That gentleman, on hearing the news, opened one of the long French windows, and went out by that way, by which means he stole a march of some minutes upon Miss Farebrother's nephew.

The consequence was that, by the time Gas-

pard reached the group, and began to relate the details of the discovery of the body to the two policemen, he found that they were already in possession of Dr. Skates's version of the affair, and moreover of that ingenious gentleman's theories about the crime. Both the officers were very nervous, very deferential, and it was not until the colloquy between them and Gaspard had lasted some minutes that he discovered, to his hot indignation, that the questions they asked all pointed to the implication of his brother Michael in the crime.

The anger with which he turned upon Dr. Skates, when he recognized this fact, of course did him no good in the eyes either of the local superintendent of police, an antiquated and slow-witted functionary, or with his subordinate, a raw hand with little experience beyond drunk and disorderly cases, or an occasional instance of petty theft.

"You've been putting suggestions into the mouths of these men!" cried Gaspard, indignantly, gaining by this remark a snub from the Doctor, and establishing firmly in the minds of the two policemen the notion that he was trying to shield his brother, whom he knew to be guilty of the murder.

"You do me a great injustice," said Dr. Skates with dignity. "These officers very naturally appealed to me, as a visitor in the house, for such information as I could give them, about the events of the last two days and nights. I told them that the household was roused two nights

ago by cries and sounds of a struggle, and that some of us went out and found your brother lying, with his leg broken, in a long hole in the ground, which he had apparently been digging, near this spot."

They were all standing, in fact, between the place where Michael had been found and the stack of wood under which the body of the murdered man was still lying.

It was the suggestion of the Superintendent, offered quickly to prevent an altercation between the two gentlemen, that a doctor should be sent for to examine the body before it was moved. Gaspard, remembering that Dr. Preston was still in the house, went himself in search of him, and the Doctor followed, both making their way through a terror-stricken little group of servants and neighbors, who slunk away as they came near.

Gaspard found Dr. Preston at the foot of the staircase, receiving from Valetta a number of corked bottles, in which she had kept the food prepared for Miss Farebrother in the dressing-room. On learning the gruesome business upon which he was wanted the doctor was about to put the bottles into his carriage, which was waiting outside, when he suddenly caught sight of Dr. Skates in the background, following Gaspard. In the dry voice which had never been drier than it was to-night, Dr. Preston thereupon told the little companion to keep them for him till he came in again, and as a further precaution he told Gaspard to remain with her. And as he said this,

the burly figure of Dr. Skates disappeared again in the direction of the grounds.

"Come into the drawing-room," said Gaspard in a low voice. But Valetta would not.

"Mrs. Skates is in there," said she. "I think I'm more afraid of her than I am of him. I believe she'd snatch these bottles away, in spite of both you and me."

They both spoke in hoarse whispers, shocked and shaken by the gloomy and mysterious events in which they found themselves involved. Gaspard soon broke out into denunciations of the artful Skates.

"He's trying to throw the guilt of this murder on my brother," said he.

Valetta shuddered, and her lips formed the words: "I knew he'd do that." Then she added: "Why did he kill the man?"

Gaspard bent his head very low to impart the following information: "The man was a detective, and he had recognized Skates as a man named Anderson, who tried to poison a rich old lady at Bournemouth. But it seems he hadn't had time to send the news to his headquarters, Scotland Yard, for they wouldn't listen to me there."

Valetta looked very thoughtful for a moment, and then her clever bright little brain evolved a bright suggestion.

"Why don't you telegraph to the police at Bournemouth?" said she, "and ask them to send a man here who knew this Anderson?"

Gaspard's face lit up.

"Splendid! said he. "I'll do it at once."

Valetta detained him as he was moving away.

"And listen," whispered she, "don't say a word about this to anybody. I don't think Dr. Skates can have known that you knew he was Anderson. He must have thought the poor detective was the only one that knew it, or he wouldn't have killed him. So for the present he feels safe, don't you see? Because as long as he isn't identified, nothing will come of any discovery the doctor may make about the food. Do you see?"

Gaspard nodded. It was an awful thing to think that he must still go on meeting this scoundrel, this poisoner, this cold-blooded murderer, without denouncing him to his face. But a very little reflection convinced him that Valetta's quick instinct was right. Skates was such a dangerous customer that the greatest caution was necessary indeed; and while he stood in his present ticklish position, they might feel safe from further outrages until they had made the case strong enough against him for the law to step in.

As it was getting late, Valetta urged Gaspard not to wait for Dr. Preston's return, but to start at once for the telegraph office.

"Get away by all means without the Skateses' knowledge, if you can," was her advice. "You may be sure he will keep close to Dr. Preston's side, and Mrs. Skates will be looking out of the drawing-room window for him. So at present the coast's clear. Go! go! go!"

Gaspard followed her instructions implicitly, and the time seemed long while Valetta kept

guard in the hall. As she expected, she saw nothing of Dr. Skates until the examination of the body was over, when he came in with Dr. Preston, declaring that the sight had quite unnerved him.

Dr. Preston said very little, but when he had taken the bottles from Valetta and was just going out, he stooped to say low in the girl's ear:

"I should keep Miss Farebrother in her own room all day to-morrow, and don't let her see anybody but Jarman and yourself. Say it's my order. And don't let her hear anything about this dreadful business, if you can help it."

But this injunction was rather difficult to follow. It is not possible for such an occurrence to take place in the grounds of a quiet country house without exciting a great commotion. And Miss Farebrother had already heard the noise of a concourse of people in the garden, and had seen, even from her bed, the waving lights carried under the trees. Gently and cautiously, Valetta had to tell her something of the truth, suppressing, of course, the fact that any suspicion lay upon members of the household. Miss Farebrother, however, was not without intelligence enough to perform the operation known as putting two and two together; and remembering that Michael had been found in the garden at a mysterious hour of the night, she soon began to frown at the mention of his name in an unmistakable manner. She made kindly inquiries about Dr. Skates, too, with an interest which irritated poor Valetta. Luckily, she did not, however, ask to see either him or his wife, and when, on the following morn-

ing, her little companion told her that Dr. Preston wished her to keep to her room for another day, and see nobody, she submitted with a fairly good grace.

There was one other precaution which clever little Valetta took, without consulting anybody. Miss Farebrother was in the habit of keeping a large, old-fashioned ebony dressing-case, full of valuable jewelry, at the bottom of her wardrobe. And in it, as Valetta knew, she always had some gold and notes, sometimes only forty or fifty pounds, but oftener a much larger amount. This fact was perfectly well-known to the three people most about her, Valetta, Jarman, and Mrs. Skates, and it must therefore also be known—so the young companion argued with herself—to Mrs. Skates's husband.

Now the young girl foresaw with some trepidation, that events might be expected to move rapidly before long, and she wondered whether, in the case of their finding refuge in flight, the Doctor and his wife would think of that dressing-case. She therefore took the opportunity, as soon as Miss Farebrother had gone to sleep that night, to take the dressing-case noiselessly out of the wardrobe, and to put it into a box-ottoman in the boudoir, carefully covering it with a few sheets of old music, a large pile of which she had displaced to make room for the dressing-case.

She then carried the rest of the music into the bedroom, where she hid it under the sofa.

It became evident, however, on the following day, that flight was the last notion likely to enter

the head of Dr. Skates. He was as lively and charming as usual, trying to keep up everybody's spirits, and only showing by an occasional sympathetic reference that he was impressed by the tragedy which had taken place.

Mrs. Skates, however, refused to be cheered up, and remained throughout the day low-spirited and nervous. She professed great disappointment on hearing that Miss Farebrother could not come down-stairs, but she did not ask to see her, and when her husband suggested that she should do so, she shrank from the notion.

It was late in the afternoon of that day, and Gaspard and Valetta were both in the drawing-room, the latter having been sent down by Miss Farebrother, when a servant announced that a man wished to speak to Mr. Gaspard.

Dr. Skates, who was standing, teacup in hand, in his favorite position with his back to the fire, looked quickly from the servant to Gaspard, and back again. He appeared to be about to ask a question, but before he could open his mouth, the younger man said quickly:

"Show him in here."

Valetta kept her eyes on her teacup, but Mrs. Skates drew a long breath, and her husband turned to her with his ready laugh.

"Why, my dear Blanche, how nervous you've grown!" cried he. "But I suppose it's not to be wondered at. There, there, my dear, don't look so frightened; I only spoke to tease you."

Even while he was patting her shoulder with a kindly hand, Gaspard's voice, which sounded

so broken and harsh as to be scarcely recognizable, cried: "Ah, how do you do?"

Dr. Skates instinctively looked round to see to whom this oddly uttered greeting was given, and a change came over his face at once.

Yet, at first sight, there would have appeared to be nothing alarming about the very commonplace-looking person who had just come round the screen into the room. He was a man of about thirty-five, with a black mustache, and a well set-up, smart appearance. He wore a warm, dark overcoat, and carried a round-topped black hat in his hand. But his eyes swept the room with a keen professional glance, and rested upon Dr. Skates.

It was not until then that he returned Gaspard's greeting. Even as he did so, his sharp black eyes gave another glance at the Doctor.

"I got your telegram, sir," he said, "and received instructions to come on here at once."

Gaspard, however, took care to keep his eyes fixed on the new-comer.

"The fact is," he said, "that a man has been murdered here; I dare say you've heard about it coming along; and there's a great deal of mystery about it. I'm inclined to think the local police are scarcely strong enough to grapple with such a business. That's why I sent for you."

"Any one suspected?"

"Nobody at all," cried Gaspard quickly. "It's a mystery altogether. This gentleman, Dr. Skates, and these ladies—by the by, I'm sorry to have to talk about it before them—know as much

about it as I do, and that's not much. Sit down, pray. We'll tell you all about it. Dr. Skates, you're a better speaker than I. Will you tell the story?"

Dr. Skates hesitated only for a moment; then he did as he was asked, giving a very straightforward version of the affair, and treating much more circumspectly than hitherto the absent Michael's share in the events of the fatal night.

The police officer listened with the greatest attention and respect, and now, instead of looking at Dr. Skates, as he had done at first, he kept his eyes studiously away from him, looking at the room, at Gaspard, at Valetta, and at Mrs. Skates, with the same amount of placid non-interest.

"It seems a very puzzling affair, sir," he said, when the recital was over, meeting the Doctor's eyes again for a moment, and then looking away. "Have you no clue? No suspicions?"

The Doctor shook his head gravely. Except that his florid complexion was a little paler than usual, he appeared to be quite undisturbed.

"It isn't safe to have suspicions," he said gravely. "It's better to do as Mr. Farebrother has done, and to put the matter at once into professional hands."

"I quite agree with you, sir. Perhaps," and the visitor rose and turned to Gaspard, "you would let me see the place where the body was found?"

Gaspard at once led the way across the room to the window that faced the lawn, and went out with him.

It was not surprising that so highly strung a woman as Mrs. Skates should utter a moan of deep distress as soon as they had gone out. Valetta, shaking in every limb, and feeling like a spy in the presence of these two, ran out through the inner door with a scared face, and hastened up-stairs.

As soon as Gaspard and the police officer from Bournemouth were half-way across the lawn, the latter said, dropping the words out in a casual way, and with only a half-turn of the head towards his companion :

"That's him, sir. That's Anderson. His beard and hair were black when he was at Bournemouth ; but there's no mistake about him possible. How did you know who he was ? "

For answer Gaspard told him the whole story of the Skateses, and their stay at the Abbey, his suspicions and his brother's, the manner in which the artful Doctor had worked round Miss Farebrother to get her to leave her property in his hands, his brother's communication with Scotland Yard, and the exclamation of the detective Watkin, who was sent down to watch Skates.

"Watkin ! " said the officer. "That was the very man who came down from London in the Bournemouth affair, and I've no doubt he was sent here on account of the similarity of the cases."

"I don't think though, that they had any idea, at Scotland Yard, that Skates was Anderson," said Gaspard. "They wouldn't have treated me in the off-hand way they did yesterday, if they

had thought they were on the track of a man like that."

And he repeated his experience at the police head-quarters on the preceding day.

"I shouldn't wonder," said the officer, "if Anderson had been at work there. Poor Watkin was the only man up there that knew him, I believe."

"That has been suggested," said Gaspard.

"Look here, sir, I'll go back to the house and put a few questions, if you'll allow me, to the man and to the young lady that's looked after your aunt. And I think, if our gentleman hasn't disappeared before then, I shall have enough to go upon, and I'll clap the darbies on him and take him before the nearest J.P. straight away."

"That'll be Colonel Marsh, at the corner," said Gaspard. "I'll have the close carriage brought round for you."

So they took a hasty glance at the spot where the body was found, and the officer went into the out-house where the dead man lay, while Gaspard gave the order at the stables. Then they returned to the house, and Gaspard brought Valetta back into the hall to relate all she knew.

The result was that Gaspard and the officer returned to the drawing-room together, where they found the Doctor and his wife in their old positions, he on the hearthrug, and she in an armchair.

"I beg pardon, sir," said the police officer to the former, standing at a respectful distance, and again keeping his eyes away from his face, "but I've got all the information this gentleman could

give me, and all the young lady could give me : I should be glad if you would give me all you can too."

"Certainly I will," said Dr. Skates readily. "Fire away, and I'll answer all your questions as well as I can."

"Well, in the first place, sir, would you tell me about those fireworks you let off in the grounds the night before last?"

The Doctor never flinched. He laughed a little.

"I didn't let them off! I only wanted to," he said promptly. "I set fire to my coat and had to come in to change it."

"And would you oblige me, sir, by letting me see the damaged coat?"

At this question Mrs. Skates started violently, unmistakably, and cried :

"It's that horrid little mischief-maker, Miss Bell, told you to ask that!"

Dr. Skates laughed and patted her shoulder, in his usual kindly fashion.

"Nonsense, nonsense, Blanche. Every little detail about such a night as that has to be well sifted." He turned to the officer. "Certainly, you shall see the coat, or what remains of it. Is it in my chest of drawers, Blanche?"

Mrs. Skates bowed her head. Gaspard fancied that something in the Doctor's look as he met her eyes instructed her to give an assent.

"Then," said the Doctor, "I'll bring it down to you."

He left the room in the most leisurely way in

world, but the police-officer sauntered quietly towards the door after him, and Gaspard went too. When the latter looked round, hearing a slight noise, he saw Mrs. Skates standing by one of the windows, which she was holding open, looking out.

"What's the matter?" asked Gaspard, going back.

"I feel rather faint, that's all," said she.

It was a few seconds later when Valetta, who had returned to Miss Farebrother's room, and was sitting by the fire, was startled to see Dr. Skates, pale as the dead, and with an awful frown upon his face, in the room beside her. Miss Farebrother was in bed, and was having a little nap, and the Doctor had entered so softly through the dressing-room that she had not woke up.

Valetta did not scream, but she rose to her feet, and watched the Doctor, with her finger pressing the electric-bell as she did so. He was apparently unaware of what she was doing, being intent upon opening the wardrobe. Valetta knew what he was looking for, and knew that he would not find it. He had scarcely finished turning over the contents of the wardrobe when Jarman, in answer to the summons of the bell, came panting into the room. She uttered a shrill scream, and Miss Farebrother woke up.

Darting a savage glance at Valetta, who got behind a chair to be out of his way, he disappeared out of the room as quickly as he had entered it, leaving the three women trembling and uttering exclamations of fright.

When they had recovered enough self-possession to ring the bell again, their explanations came too late. The police-officer was at once informed of what had occurred, and the house was searched from garret to cellar.

But Dr. Skates had got away.

CHAPTER XXIV

The whole house was in an uproar for the rest of the day. The local police were at once communicated with, and a telegram was sent to Scotland Yard with full information of the murder of Watkin and the escape of the suspected man.

In the meantime none of the servants could rest, or go from one room to another alone. It was in vain that an attempt was made to keep the events of the day from Michael, and it was very difficult to keep him quiet when he knew that the rascal was unmasked at last. It was late in the afternoon when Gaspard, who had been to the police station, came back with the news that Anderson had been caught.

"It was the man from Bournemouth who caught him," said he, "and I saw him off to Canterbury in the company of the officer and of one of our men down here. They got a warrant this afternoon."

"To Canterbury?" echoed Valetta.

"Yes. They'd no place strong enough to keep him in here. I suppose he'll be brought

up at the police court in the morning." Then after a pause he asked quickly: "Where's Mrs. Skates?"

"She went to her room at once, without a word to anybody. Shall I send one of the servants to her? I daren't go myself. Hating me as she does, she wouldn't like to see me at such a time."

Gaspard assented to this course, and a maid was sent to ask whether Mrs. Skates would come down to dinner. The girl came back with a frightened face.

"Well, what did she say?" asked Gaspard.

"She isn't there, sir. Mrs. Skates isn't there. There's a young lady in her room, packing her trunks."

Gaspard shivered.

"More of this trickery!" he exclaimed in disgust. "It makes me sick. At such a time as this they can bring this other woman in!"

Before Valetta could answer, the door of the room in which they stood was thrown hurriedly open, and there entered, dressed in a travelling dress, with a bonnet and a long cloak, the tall young woman with dark hair whom Gaspard in a moment recognized as the "ghost" he had seen by his aunt's bedside. He started to his feet in amazement, not unmingled with a sort of terror. But Valetta sat still without moving.

The new-comer tossed her head, and spoke; and lo, the voice was the voice of Mrs. Skates.

Although before she opened her mouth Gaspard had had an inkling of the truth, yet the knowledge that the slender dark girl and the stout,

middle-aged Mrs. Skates were one and the same person gave him nevertheless a sickening shock.

"Oh, don't pretend to be surprised," said the woman, with an irritated manner. "Miss Bell knew all about it, and so I suppose you did."

"No," said Valetta, "I had guessed the truth on the night of the party, when I saw you lying on the sofa, and when I saw some of your padded frocks hanging in the cupboard. But I said nothing about it; it was a thing one had to be very sure about."

"Oh, well, you know it now," said Mrs. Skates shortly, "and you know that my husband has been arrested, at least the servants say so: and so, of course, you're all quite satisfied."

Both these young people who were listening to her felt sorry for this woman, who, tied to an accomplished rogue, had been faithful to him, submissive to him through everything. They made no reply, therefore, to her words, and after a pause it was she who went on. Turning to Valetta she said, with vixenish emphasis:

"It was you who did it all—you whom he was always admiring for your pretty face and your cleverness. He didn't know where your grand brains would lead him! However, you need not flatter yourself that you will have the laugh on your side all the time. You will not have the pleasure of hearing that he is in prison——"

"But you mustn't deceive yourself about that," interrupted Gaspard gently. "He is really in the hands of the police——"

It was Mrs. Skates who interrupted now, with a little scoffing laugh.

"He may have been in their hands when you last heard about him, but it by no means follows that he is in them now," she retorted calmly. "A man of resource like my Jamie is not to be beaten by a handful of your chuckle-headed country policemen. I wish you both good evening. Pray, Miss Bell, give my kind regards to Mr. Michael Farebrother, and tell him he ought to be proud of the pains you have taken on his behalf. But you won't succeed in fastening his crime upon my husband."

And she sailed out of the room, and walked steadily to the fly she had ordered.

Gaspard felt nothing but pity for her. Knowing, as she pretended not to know, how strong the case against her husband was, he thought that the poor woman might be reduced to great straits of poverty when she discovered the truth as to his position. So he got to the cab before her, and put notes and gold to the value of twenty pounds into the outside pocket of her travelling-bag. Then he escaped quickly into the house, leaving her to discover what he had done when she was well on her way.

When he got back to Valetta, he found her in tears.

"I felt so sorry for her," said she. "It will break her heart when she finds out she's wrong about her husband."

"Are you so sure she will be wrong?" asked Gaspard doubtfully. "He's escaped them before,

you know. They could bring nothing home to him in the Bournemouth business!"

"But there's more against him this time—murder and attempted murder, too," said Valetta.

"We shall see," said Gaspard dubiously.

And the event proved that he had reason for his doubts. Anderson, alias Macdonald, alias Skates, and alias several other names which never came to light, was indeed duly handcuffed and put into the train at St. Mary's-on-Sea in charge of two policemen. But before the train reached Canterbury he took a flying leap through the window of the compartment, and falling on his head, received such injuries that he died within a couple of hours in a cottage close by, thus ending a career of daring rascality, of wasted ability, and of almost unexampled callousness and brilliancy combined.

There was no doubt that, but for his daring leap, he would have been hanged for the murder of the unfortunate Detective Watkin; and subsequent inquiries proved that Anderson's audacity in the matter had been extreme. On finding that he was recognized by this man, the only Scotland Yard official who knew him, he had at once made up his mind to make away with him without delay, and that very night, after the magic lantern entertainment, he had taken the poker from one of the fireplaces of the great hall, and, in spite of the remonstrances of his wife (overheard by Valetta) had gone out, met Watkin, pretended to parley with him in the open space under the trees, and, watching his opportunity, had dealt him a

stunning blow, which he had quickly followed with others, until the unfortunate man's head was battered in. He had then dragged the body to the woodstack, covered it over, and turned over the ground to hide the traces of the deed. Then hastening to the house by the garden door, at which he had fumbled with his hands until his wife, who was on the watch, let him in, he had gone upstairs and changed his clothes, burning the stained dress-suit in his own bedroom fire that night, and accounting for an injury which the dying grasp of the detective had inflicted, by the lame story of a cut inflicted by one of the lantern slides.

There could be no doubt that Michael disturbed him that night while he was digging a grave in which to bury the man he had murdered.

And on the following morning, very early, he, having discovered on the body a copy of the code by which Watkin telegraphed to his chief, sent the following message, decipherable only to those to whom it was sent, up to Scotland Yard:

"On a wrong scent. The young man who instructed me is trying to get hold of his aunt's money. Am watching him. Will send full details.

It was owing to this telegram, which was supposed to be sent by the unfortunate Watkin, that poor Gaspard had been so coolly received at headquarters, on his visit to the police.

The whole history of Anderson, as far as it could be known, came out later. Born in Scotland, he had gone to America at an early age;

and having made himself unpleasantly conspicuous in several faith-healing scandals, and in other more or less shady transactions with the help of spiritualistic mediums, he had come to England under the name of Macdonald, and started business as a "Professor of Magnetic Healing" in London, where, having married a very beautiful young Englishwoman, he lived in the most extravagant style, and lavished on his wife every luxury that money could procure.

When even the flourishing business he carried on proved unequal to the strain of this mode of life, he and his wife suddenly disappeared, and though he turned up at Bournemouth under the name of Anderson, the wife remained in obscurity for about two years, when, after the Bournemouth escapade had made it desirable again to change both his residence and his name, Anderson appeared at St. Mary's-on-Sea, with his white hair now undyed, and his wife came with him, no longer as a young, slim woman, but in the disguise of a middle-aged and stout one.

Even this most undesirable disguise the woman was willing to put on, for the sake of being once more with the man she devotedly loved. There were not wanting signs, however, that the woman, not naturally heartless or base, suffered cruelly under the stress of the life she had to lead, and grew irritable, restless, and miserable. While she only once rebelled or threatened to turn traitor to her master, she was sullen and unhappy, even while she submitted to each new trick, and took her share in its successful accomplishment.

It was, of course, she, who, discarding her disguise and wearing her own long dark hair loose, had entered Miss Farebrother's room at night as a "spirit," and induced her to accord to Dr. Skates that implicit confidence which the old lady might sometimes have been inclined to withhold. She it was who, much against her will, had arranged for Miss Farebrother's invalid food to be prepared in the dressing-room, where her husband could slip in and out unseen by anyone in the bedroom, and introduce a deadly drug into a harmless dish or draught.

For in every one of the samples of food which clever Valetta had withheld from Miss Farebrother during her illness, colchicum was discovered, in doses which, if they had all been administered as he had supposed, must have caused her death.

It was only little by little that Miss Farebrother, very much shaken by what she had already heard of the disgraceful collapse of her favorites, was allowed to hear the whole of the appalling history.

Valetta kept silent upon the matter as long as she could, even under the provocation of finding that Miss Farebrother was inclined to be cold and distant to her, and to appear to attribute some of the recent disasters to her interference.

So strongly did Valetta feel this unjust treatment that, when ten days had elapsed since the death of the Doctor and the disappearance of Mrs. Skates, she one day announced to the old lady that she should be glad if she might go away.

Miss Farebrother, who, since the dreadful events of the last few days, had kept her room to

avoid visitors and the sight of the room she associated with her lost proteges, turned upon her sharply.

"And, pray, what is the reason of this?" she asked, haughtily.

"Well, for one, thing, I quite understand that you would like to be free from all associations which remind you of what has happened," stammered Valetta, not making her sense very clear, but hurrying on with her words.

"But I don't associate you with what has happened, except in the right way. It was only this morning Dr. Preston told me you'd saved me from being poisoned."

And the old lady began to shiver and to grow pale.

"Oh, don't think about that," said Valetta quickly. "Of course, for my own sake, I had to take care nothing happened to you."

"Then it appears you saved my jewelry and money from being stolen, and that you gave some valuable information to the police."

"Well, I think all those things irritate you, don't they?" said Valetta, "and make you look upon me as a female detective rather than as an ordinary human girl."

"Well, I do think you dreadfully clever," admitted the old lady, looking at her with a certain weird interest.

"Well," said little Valetta, rising from her chair and clasping her hands, "I'm going to confess something which will show you that I'm very human, much too human, in fact, for my position

here. I'm in love with your nephew, Michael. There!" And she opened her hands and spread them out apologetically. "And so I haven't been near the poor fellow all the time he's been ill, so that he might not make you angry again through seeing me. For I tell you, if he were to see much of me——"

Her voice trembled and she broke down a moment, and then went on:

"And so I'm going before he gets up again."

Miss Farebrother listened in silence, and presently a tear rolled down her cheek. Then she held out her little yellow hand.

"Come here, child," she said "I'm a silly old woman, and I haven't liked to own it. Stay with me, child, stay, and—and—well, you needn't worry your head about Michael. He shall do as he likes, and if he wants a clever and pretty little wife, and doesn't want to go far for her, why—I shan't be very cruel."

And as the girl sank down beside her chair, the old lady laid a kind hand on her pretty head, and printed a kiss on her white forehead.

That afternoon there was a light tap at the door of Michael's room, and when the nurse opened it, she found Miss Farebrother and Valetta there together.

"May we come in for a few minutes, if we're quiet?" asked the old lady.

Michael started at the sight of the two ladies, and the tears came to his eyes. His aunt kissed him gently, and led the girl, who was shy and silent, forward by the hand.

"She wanted to go away from us, Michael, but I think you've only got to ask her to persuade her to stay."

They said nothing to each other, these two: they could scarcely exchange a look for the moisture that would come. At last Michael heaved a great sigh, and said:

"Let me kiss your hand, Valetta, and then I shall know you're real." But instead of that, she put her lips to his forehead, and he looked from her to his aunt and back again and smiled and sighed at the same time.

"Thank Heaven!" whispered he to himself rather than to them, "it's over. It was a desperate game, but we've gained the day. And hurray!" murmured he, chuckling, "Mrs. Chalmers won't send Madeline to see what the children are doing the next time poor Gaspard speaks to her!"

And he was right. She didn't.

THE END.

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